

Tales from a Nuffield Scholar: John Corrie 1974 NSch

Our family farm in the south West of Scotland is approximately 400 acres. The family came here in the early 1800's as tenant farmers, and it has been farmed by each generation since then. I bought the farm in 1975.

I was educated locally, then went as a boarder to George Watsons in Edinburgh. However, I found class work extremely difficult, and like Lord Nuffield, left school when I was 15 years old. Later I was diagnosed with dyslexia.

My father farmed in the old tradition. He had 66 milking Ayrshire cows and 150 ewes. The land was very broken, and used in rotation – oats, then turnips and kale, then oats under sown with grass seed, followed by 3 years of rest. When I took over the farm I increased the dairy herd to 200, and the sheep flock to 500 - all on the same acreage.

Many of the Corrie family had emigrated to many places – America, Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, and my father was determined that I would have the chance of travel too. So, in 1952 at the age of seventeen I became a British POM, emigrating to New Zealand on a £10 fare. My father was Chairman of the Rotary Club in our town in Scotland, and he made contact with the Chairman of Rotary in Christchurch in New Zealand, and made arrangements for me to work on a farm. The main production was 1200 Corriedale ewes, and my first job was lambing. I remember the weather was appalling, and it was tragic to see the number of dead lambs, but it was pointed out to me that each Corriedale was carrying about 12 lbs of wool, and the cost of wool then was about £1 per lb so it did not matter if you lost lambs because the income from the wool would cover the loss. I learnt a great deal, and, as they were also breeding rams, I learnt to trim and dress them ready for sale.

I found New Zealand a very friendly place, went to Lincoln Agricultural College, and played rugby with the local team in North Canterbury for three seasons. I also had to do National Service in the NZ Army, and was commissioned from the ranks.

Being an only son, my father called me back to Scotland to help him manage the farm. However, I wanted to put into use all the new ideas I had learnt during the Scholarship. My father being a traditionalist would not change, and I took the tenancy of a farm in the Yarrow Valley in the Scottish Borders, as I wanted to continue learning about sheep and wool.

I applied for a Nuffield Scholarship in 1972, and I felt honoured when I was invited to London for an interview, and consequently given a 6 month Scholarship to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand to study sheep and wool production. This was just at the time when these countries were considering setting up their own Wool Boards to market their wool.

In South Africa I stayed with both English and Afrikaans families, and it was amazing for me to hear the difference between them on the subject of apartheid. Perhaps it was then that changed my life, and set me on a new path. Staying in Johannesburg I decided to take a bus – but having waited patiently for 30 minutes an African approached me and told me that I would not get a bus at that stand as it was for blacks only. I moved into parkland, and sat down on a bench where a black lady was sitting, she immediately moved away – then police arrived and warned me about sitting on a bench that was for black people only. I decided then that I must do something with my life to assist these people, and those living in the sub-Saharan countries.

Most of the food production was subsistence farming, and land rights were a major area of discontent. Large units were confiscated and broken up, and became non-productive. More effort was being put into that than to raise food production. At the same time Europe was producing less food when the world population was increasing at a frightening pace.

The next part of my journey was to Australia and Tasmania, visiting sheep farms, and learning about the quality of the wool, and the requirements for the market. I learned about sheep handling, and the equipment for handling large flocks of sheep and cattle. In Tasmania I studied the production of lavender.

The last part of my trip was to New Zealand where I met many of my farming friends whom I had met during my student days there almost 20 years before. By 1973 the price of wool had crashed, and they were finding it difficult to find a market, not just for wool, but also for lamb meat, where they had had the opportunity to sell to the UK.

Discussions were fierce from both sides, and taught me to cope with difficult questions and make speeches – good training for a politician.

The hospitality from families was amazing, and I found when I arrived back in the UK after my 6 months I had some money to give back to Nuffield from the allowance of £1100 which included all costs and flights.

On my return home I went round farms in Scotland and north of England talking to members of the National Farmers Union about the difference between farming in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and the difficulties that they were facing. During my time in New Zealand as a student I had been lucky to have Godfrey Bowen teach me his unique method of shearing sheep, and I became a Senior Instructor in Scotland for the Wool Marketing Board teaching young farmers this method of shearing travelling to many remote areas of Scotland. The complaint was that the machine cut the wool too short, but this was proved not to be the case.

I was conscious at that time that I had given more than I had taken as far as knowledge was concerned, and that a new chapter was about to open in my life. I was relieved to see in the Nuffield Report that others had the same view.

I had always been interested in politics, and put my name forward for a constituency in the west coast of Scotland. I was nominated as the Conservative Candidate for Bute and North Ayrshire in 1973, and became a Member of Parliament in February 1974. When Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister she gave me the position of Scottish Whip, and I later joined the group of All Party MPs who were nominated to the European Assembly with meetings in Luxembourg and Brussels. I found this much more rewarding than Westminster which is confrontational compared to Europe where everything was done by co-operation and conciliation. I wrote many of the directives on agriculture, fishing and foreign aid using much of the knowledge I had gained from my Nuffield Scholarship. I remained until direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979.

In 1979 I drew first in the Ballot for Private Members Bills, and presented a Bill to reduce the time limit of abortion (known as the Corrie Bill) This was the longest running Private Members Bill that had ever been presented, but it was talked out by the Opposition. I was awarded the Wilberforce Plaque for Humane Work in 1981.

Amazingly I again drew first in the ballot in 1981 for a Private Members Bill, and my Bill on Diseases of Fish became an Act, and is still the law today.

Following Direct Elections in Europe Margaret Thatcher sent me to the Council of Europe – a bigger organisation with about 47 countries. It did much the same work as the non-elected European Assembly had done, and I took part in many debates discussing Farming and Agriculture, being able to give my expertise to many delegates who had no knowledge of farming.

In 1987 I lost my Parliamentary seat at Westminster, and was out of politics until 1994.

Back at the farm in Scotland I had built up a herd of Belted Galloway cattle, and through this decade we took the Supreme Championships at the Royal Show, the Great Yorkshire Show and the Royal Highland Show. Our bull Park Perseus semen has been exported to over 14 countries throughout the world, and 3 years ago won the Platinum Award in USA for the animal whose progeny have won the most championships in USA.

In 1994 I decided to try to re-enter politics in the European Parliament, and was honoured to be chosen by Worcestershire and South Warwickshire as their Candidate. It was amazing that people understood very little about the European Parliament, and even worse that some did not want to know about Europe. Even then there was an element who wanted us to break away, which subsequently happened.

In 1999 I was honoured to be made the Co-President of the African Caribbean and Pacific/ European Union Joint Parliamentary Assembly which had 78 Member countries balanced with 78 Members from the European Parliament. The budget over 5 years was between 12 and 14 billion euros. There was no possibility of spending that level of money – although required- because there was simply not the capacity in these developing countries to carry out the projects. I had the opportunity to discuss agriculture, and how to develop it in all these countries. The biggest problem was corruption, which made helping these countries very difficult. The answer was to ask them what they wanted – whether the building of a school or hospital. Then to build and hand over the running of it.

I also went to about 20 developing countries taking part in Election Observation – Africa, Central America, Africa and the Pacific Islands. When working in the north of Tanzania in the town of Kilosa it was pointed out that they had been unable to improve their school which had no toilets or running water. My wife and I decided to try to fund raise back in Europe for this project. We raised enough money to build a large meeting room, a library, a computer room, separate toilets for the boys and girls, and 2 houses for single female teachers. Now there are about 600 children at the school, and many are hoping to complete their education at Dar es Salaam University. Education is the success for the future of not only Africa but all developing countries throughout the world.

During my 2 years as President I had the honour of meeting over 50 Heads of State, including President Mandela, and President Castro of Cuba.

In 2004 I decided to retire from politics, and go back to farming in Scotland, but with the broken land on the farm it was impossible to develop large units of cattle and to make enough silage so the decision was made to sell a large proportion of the farmland, and only keep the best Belted Galloways to breed for export.

I was then approached to Head a small company based in the Netherlands with a committee made up of Members and Former Members of the European Parliament to work in countries in Sub Saharan Africa. At present we are working in South Sudan retraining the interim government in the hope that in the future it was become a democratic state, but this is always difficult in Africa as the population tend to vote on tribal lines, and the countries in Africa were divided up in past centuries by Europeans who did not understand that the way they formed the borders split tribes with disastrous results.

I look back now over 50 years and think about the change of direction I took. I know that the work which I have done in politics was shaped by my experience as a Nuffield Scholar which gave me the confidence to follow my dream.

John Alexander Corrie

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