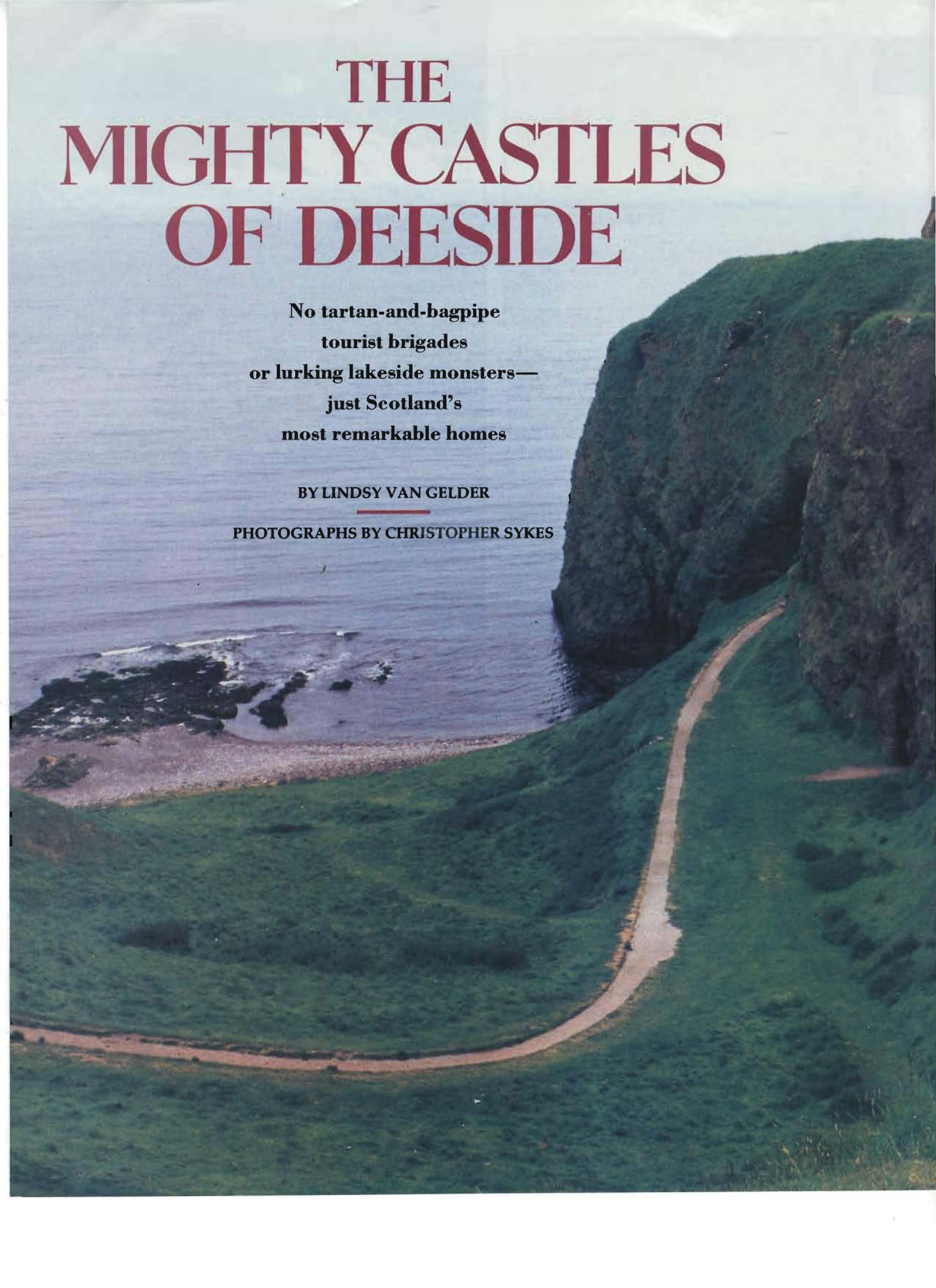


# THE MIGHTY CASTLES OF DEESIDE

No tartan-and-bagpipe  
tourist brigades  
or lurking lakeside monsters—  
just Scotland's  
most remarkable homes

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHER SYKES





A difficult climb up a sheer crag will lead you to the magnificent ruins of Dunnottar Castle, a fourteenth-century fortress south of Aberdeen.



Unless they're in the oil business, most Americans never get near Aberdeen, Scotland's third largest city. Few of us have traveled the surrounding countryside, a wedge of land carved by the rivers Don and Dee, which form a sideways V to the north and south of the city. The region has none of the haggis-and-bagpipe tourist trappings of the Northern Highlands, no peekaboo prehistoric monsters in its lochs, and not even much claim to the

greatest pages of Scottish history. But what it does have—aside from an unspoiled natural beauty all its own—is a remarkable concentration of castles, many in the baronial style unique to Scotland. In fact, so many are clustered near the banks of the Dee that the area is known as the Royal Deeside.

Even on a misty day, the hills and fields of the Deeside and Donside are a brilliant green, like *The Wizard of Oz's* Emerald City. Other colors do dot the landscape—gold broom growing wild along the roadside, gray granite cottages, black and white cows and sheep—but they only make the green look greener. It would be dazzling if it weren't also so sleepy.

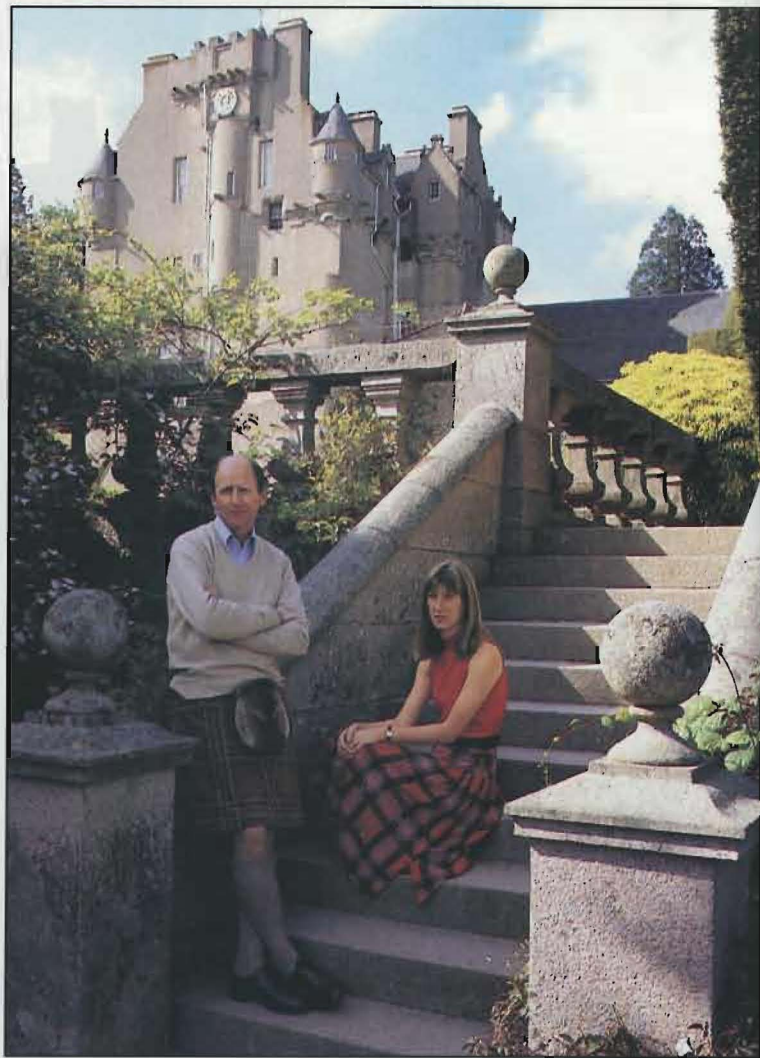
Centuries before the discovery of offshore oil in the 1970s, Aberdeenshire served as the ancestral home of the reigning Gordon clan, as well as the Keith, Fraser, Forbes, Burnett, Erskine, and Irvine families. All built castles and more castles. Occasionally, they sacked one another's homes, as well. Today about two dozen castles still stand in the Royal Deeside.

In 1571, during a feud between the Gordons and the Forbesees, Corgarff Castle in Corgarff, on the river Don, was set on fire, burning alive the Forbes laird's family and servants. It was restored only to be burned again, this time by Jacobites, more than a hundred years later. Rebuilt once more, Corgarff eventually became a barracks; its last military use was as headquarters for the crown's attempts to control whisky smuggling in the area during the nineteenth century. Today this stark old watchdog of a castle, hulking over the river Don, waits patiently for the ghosts of contraband runners.

In Ballater, Knock Castle, now in ruins, has a bloodier history. In the 1600s, during a boundary dispute, a Forbes laird spotted the seven sons of his rival neighbor, a Gordon, chopping some peat out of what he maintained was Forbes land. Forbes beheaded all seven and mounted their heads atop the peat spades. When a servant from Knock came upon the grisly sight, he ran back to the castle and blurted out the story to his laird, the boys' father, who was standing at the head of the stairs. The Gordon laird promptly fell over the banister to his doom. Today the Gordons and the Forbesees resort to nothing more vicious than competitively tossing a caber, a telephone pole-sized javelin, at the traditional summer Highland Games.

Few castles are still used as private homes. One exception is Balmoral, summer retreat of Queen Elizabeth. Although the castle itself is closed to the public, the sumptuous grounds are open in May, June, and July, except when the royal family is in residence. Huge and ponderous, Balmoral is a well corseted dowager of a castle, but there's more of a lived-in feel to the gardens than one might expect, right down to the gravestone of Noble, "for more than fifteen years the favourite Collie and dear faithful companion of Queen Victoria."

The Deeside includes one fully preserved medieval keep at Drum Castle, in Drumoak, although its owners later added a gabled baronial wing. Displayed under glass in one room are such historic odds and ends as the snuffbox of King James VI, a ring of Mary, Queen of Scots, and both a napkin and a piece of the kilt of Bonnie Prince Charlie. South of Aberdeen, just outside Stonehaven, perched dramati-



James Burnett (above, with his wife, Fiona) spent his childhood summers at Crathes Castle. Today the property belongs to the National Trust for Scotland. Opposite top: The castle's remarkable gardens are made up of a patchwork of distinct plantings, each with a different color scheme. Opposite bottom: In the master bedroom, the headboard of a four-poster bed shows the carved heads of Alexander Burnett, the first laird to live in Crathes, and his wife, Katherine.

ically on a mossy cliff overlooking the sea, lie the spooky ruins of still another ancient fortress, Dunnottar. The great majority of castles in the Aberdeen area, however, were built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, between the Reformation and the civil wars. It was a time of unusual stability, when castle owners competed with their neighbors for the most exquisite spreads, rather than simply building fortresses to keep marauding armies at bay. Yet unlike the châteaux of the Loire or the palazzi of Renaissance Italy, these Scottish castles never quite turned to true show-off flashiness. Turrets and towers rise from squat, solid bases, like conventioning bankers in party hats. There's a low-key, flinty practicality to even the most exuberant castles, as if they'd somehow been codesigned by Walt Disney and Walter Cronkite.

Craigievar, considered by many the most elegant of the Deeside castles, is also one of the most typically schizophrenic. It was built near the village of Lumphanan in 1626 by William Forbes, who was said to have made his fortune as a merchant at Danzig (now Gdansk). Forbes, it seems, was looking for a house with a little extra class, and you can still see his dignified monogram—"MWF," for Master William Forbes, surrounded by the family crest of three muzzled bears—



In 1852, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, bought Balmoral Castle for £31,000. Since then Great Britain's royal family has used it as a summer retreat. Drum Castle (below) is composed of three sections: a medieval tower, a Jacobean mansion house, and a Victorian extension. Twenty-three generations of the Irvine clan lived here over 653 years until 1975, when Henry Forbes Irvine, the castle's final laird, bequeathed Drum to the National Trust for Scotland.

on the wonderfully restored plasterwork walls and ceilings at Craigievar. Laird Forbes managed to arrange a baronetcy of Nova Scotia for his son, and the rest is, well, social-climbing history.

**C**raigievar's interior is a disconcerting mix of the genteel and the brutal. Slits for weapons lurk in the walls a few feet from stuffy family portraits. The ladies' withdrawing room is directly over the dungeon, but an extra layer of earth between the two floors insured that the ladies at their gaming tables wouldn't be disturbed by prisoners' screams. The Blue Room is said to house a ghost, that of a trespassing Gordon who was killed at the castle.

Craigievar is typical of the baronial style in two other ways—it is made of stone, and it was built as a tower. Both features are due to the same circumstance: in the seventeenth century, there were very few forests anywhere near Aberdeen, and the trees that did grow were usually too small to make anything but doors or paneling. To compensate, builders stacked one small room on top of another, under the smallest possible roof, like a vertical railroad flat, and used the local granite for everything they could. Eventually the shortage was alleviated when large ships hauled timber over from Scandinavia. (At nearby Crathes Castle, the four-poster bed of the first laird to live there is said to have been made of wood from a shipwreck.)

Five great baronial castles—Craigievar, Crathes, Drum, and Fraser on the

Dee, and Fyvie farther north—are now run by the National Trust for Scotland and are open to the public. Crathes, in Banchory, is the most visited of all, partly because of its elaborate gardens. It, too, is said to house a ghost, the Green Lady, who for two hundred years has wandered the castle with a baby in her arms. (Guides will solemnly recount how more than a century after the Green Lady's first appearance, workers discovered a baby's skeleton under the hearthstone.)

Crathes also has a series of spectacularly painted ceilings, probably dating from the time the castle was first inhabited around 1596 by Alexander Burnett of Leys and his wife, Katherine Gordon of Lesmoir. The paintings, hidden for more than a century under a false ceiling, were only unearthed during alterations in 1877. King Arthur and King David stare down at visitors; an anonymous lady in a red dress smiles mysteriously as she plays a viol. On beams beside the paintings, artists scripted short homilies: "As a dog turneth to his owne Vomit, so the foole returneth to his own foolishness."

Crathes remained in the Burnett family continuously until 1952. James C. A. Burnett of Leys, whose grandfather donated the castle to the Trust and who still lives almost next door, spent summer holidays there as a boy in the 1940s. Today Burnett is working with American descendants of his clan to install an archive at Crathes that will tell the full history of the family, "from the aristocrats to those who made contributions to law, medicine, and the military, to the scandals," he says.





The river Dee, which wends its way through the gentle Grampian Mountains and ends at the east coast of northern Scotland, lends its name to this eclectic group of castles. Every summer, Haddo House (below left) is the site of a music and arts festival where Benjamin Britten conducted and princes Charles and Edward have performed. Below right: The energetic June, the lady of Haddo House, whose efforts have transformed the estate into a summertime cultural center.



June, marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair, and the mistress of Haddo House, an eighteenth-century manor near Tarves, is a noblewoman turned entrepreneur. Haddo House was donated to the Trust in the 1970s by Lady Aberdeen's late husband, the fourth marquess, but Lady Aberdeen, who insists that "everyone from the dustman up call me June," has been an active booster of the property for much longer.

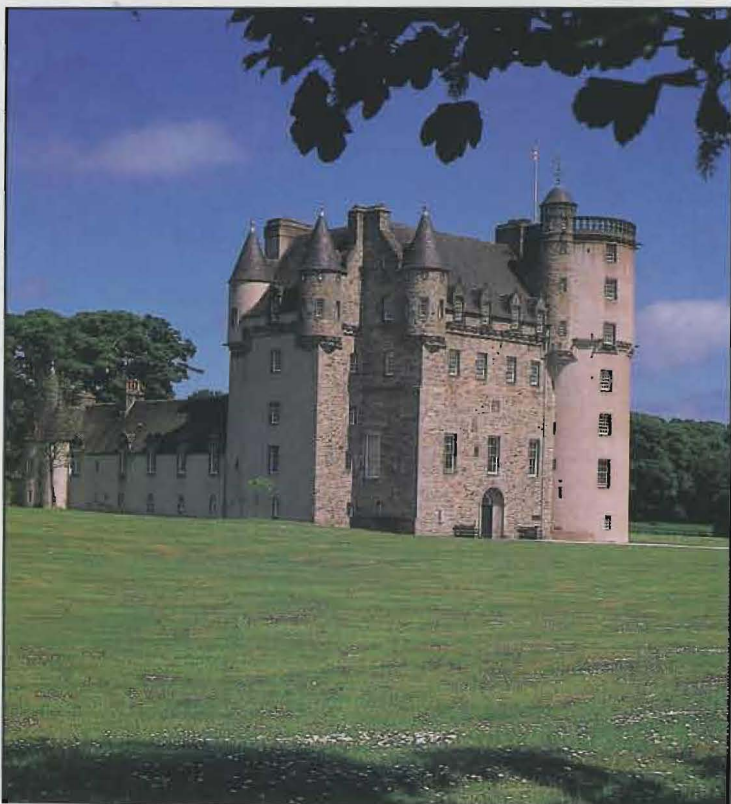
In 1945, the marquess and marchioness decided to make their home a musical center during the summer season. A concert hall, built in 1891, already stood on the grounds. Lady Aberdeen, herself educated at the Royal College of Music in London, set off to find a guest conductor. When several of her first choices fell through, the marchioness squared her tartaned shoulders and put on the show herself. Under her direction, the Haddo House Choral & Operatic Society has grown into a leading cultural center, presenting everything from Shakespeare to Gilbert and Sullivan. Annie Lennox of the Eurythmics, a local girl, sits on the board of patrons; guest conductors have included Ralph Vaughan Williams and Benjamin Britten; and Prince Charles and Prince Edward have performed here.

The marchioness resides in a private wing of the house with her granddaughter and several dogs, including a West Highland terrier named Temair. Says Lady Aberdeen, "It's traditional that we always have a West Highland terrier by that name," from the time that the first marquess's wife, Ishbel, who bred the dogs, sent a photo of herself and a terrier to someone and signed it "Ishbel, marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair." Her correspondent wrote back thanking her for the picture of herself "and your cute little dog, Temair."

From the late 1800s through the early 1900s, Ishbel and her husband were a well known, eccentric couple; when the marquess died, the marchioness continued to communicate with him through a spiritualist. They are still evident at Haddo House, especially in the library, where their portraits hang over twin fireplaces.

The best way to see Royal Deeside's castles is languidly, without an agenda, and preferably with a picnic hamper. And remember to keep your eyes open—you just might run into the Queen Mother.

**Built of local granite, Castle Fraser was inhabited by members of the Fraser family from the sixteenth century to the early 1920s, when it was bought at auction by the first Viscount Cowdray. Now part of the National Trust, it is open to the public.**



Oliver Williams

## CASTLES BY THE DEE

Most of the castles listed below belong to the National Trust for Scotland. If you're heading to the Royal Deeside, consider joining the Royal Oak Foundation in the U.S. before you go, for \$30 a person or \$50 per couple. Your contribution will go toward upkeep of the castles, get you into the castles free, and give you membership privileges in both Scotland's and England's national trusts. And it's tax deductible. Royal Oak Foundation, 285 West Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10013, or call 212-966-6565.

**BALMORAL**, a few miles west of Ballater, is one of Queen Elizabeth's private residences. The grounds are open to the public from May to July, except when the royal family is in. A small admission fee goes to charity.

**CASTLE FRASER** (National Trust) lies just south of Kemnay village and the Don River. It is open 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. from May 1 to September 30; the grounds are open year-round from 9:30 a.m. until dusk. Admission to the castle is about \$3.50 for adults, half-price for children.

**CORGARFF CASTLE** (operated by the Scottish Development Department) and its grounds are open from April 1 through September 30; hours are 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m., except Sundays, when the castle opens at 2 p.m. Admission is about one dollar.

**CRAIGIEVAR CASTLE** (National Trust) is north of Lumphanan, a village between the Don and Dee. Season, fee, hours: see Castle Fraser.

**CRATHES CASTLE** (National Trust), on the eastern edge of Banchory, is known for its outstanding gardens. Open weekends throughout April in addition to the regular National Trust season. Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; fees are about \$3.50 for adults, half-price for children.

**DRUM CASTLE** (National Trust) in Drumoak, is eleven miles west of Aberdeen. Season, fee, hours: see Castle Fraser.

**DUNNOTTAR CASTLE**, on the coast south of Aberdeen, is owned by the Cowdray family. Open all year, but closed on Saturdays from November 1 to May 1. Summer hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; winter hours 9 a.m. to dusk (can be as early as 3 p.m. in midwinter). Admission, about \$1.50.

**FYVIE CASTLE** (National Trust) is in the village of Fyvie, about twenty miles northwest of Aberdeen and ten miles north of the Don River. Season and fees: see Castle Fraser; hours are the same as those at Crathes.

**HADDO HOUSE** (National Trust) is near Tarves, eighteen miles north-west of Aberdeen. Season, fee, hours: see Castle Fraser. The estate includes a recreational park and wildlife preserve open year-round.

### STAYING BY THE DEE

**TULLICH LODGE**, by Ballater, Aberdeenshire; (0338) 55406. A crenellated and turreted sixteenth-century lodge that looks like a castle itself.

**INVERY HOUSE**, Banchory, Kincardineshire; (03302) 4782. This new hotel in a beautiful Georgian mansion has salmon fishing rights on the Dee.

**MELDRUM HOUSE**, Oldmeldrum, Aberdeenshire; (06512) 2294. A quiet country house hotel just north of the Don.—CHRISTINE B. RYAN



Craigievar Castle, a delicate, six-story fortress, was continually occupied by the Forbes clan from its earliest days in 1626 until the National Trust was given the estate in 1963. This may account for the house's nearly perfect condition. Below: The fireplace in Craigievar's great hall is capped with a tablet displaying the Royal Arms of Great Britain. The carpet's pattern is—what else?—the Forbes tartan.

