

Living with the lairds

Mary Miers enjoys the stories of 10 Scottish family seats



The oldest herd of Aberdeen Angus in existence, grazing beneath Ballindalloch Castle, Banffshire

Architecture

The Scottish Country House

James Knox (Thames & Hudson, £28 *£25)

I SPENT a great deal of time rummaging in the attic,' says Clare Macpherson-Grant, recalling the late 1970s, when she and her husband, Oliver Russell, took on the castle that has been in her family since 1546. Her father, Sir Ewan, who kick-started Ballindalloch's revival after 'naughty Uncle George' left the bulk of his will to his boyfriend, happened to mention that 'there are some ghastly paintings up there, but before putting them on the bonfire, you might just show them to the experts from the auction houses'. Britain's earliest and most important collection of 17th-century Spanish paintings is now on view again, although what visitors really love is the corridor of family photos.

Soon after the Russells took over, a friend took me to dinner at Ballindalloch and I remember enthusing about pinenuts, then a fashionable culinary novelty. From my host's flurry of questions about the potential of planting pinenut groves in the Spey valley, I realised how daunted a Highland laird must feel by the challenge of making a sprawling castle with 25,000 acres earn its keep. Happily, the Russells have triumphed at Ballindalloch and, over the past few decades, they have turned its fortunes around—with the aid of Aberdeen Angus

beef and whisky, not pinenuts.

The energy and innovation of owners past and present is a recurring theme of this splendid book, with formidable lady lairds making a strong appearance. Having played a key role in the 11th-hour rescue of Dumfries House, James Knox is interested in the ongoing survival, as well as the history, of the houses he features, and he gives many of their current owners a voice.

We hear from the 10th Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry about the influence on his forebears of ideas on estate management propounded by their friend, kinsman and neighbour Sir Walter Scott; from parliamentarian Tam Dalyell, who lives up to his family values of 'high-mindedness, courage, intellect, and enterprise, with a dash of stubbornness and swashbuckling thrown in'; and Toby Anstruther of Balcaskie, whose holidays with his mother comprised 'a cultural tour abroad with Bannister Fletcher's bible of world architecture to hand' and who, 'in a romantic twist', married Pevsner's granddaughter.

Too often, books on this subject fall into one of two extremes: the shortbread-tin fantasy or the dry, often politically prejudiced, architectural discourse. Aimed at a general audience, this volume straddles the divide with a spirited blend of architectural and decorative detail, social context and evocation of place, fluently delivered in a vivid and engaging style. The Americanisation

of spellings is deceptive, as Mr Knox is a Scot and is a trustee of the National Galleries of Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and Dumfries House.

His selection of 10 houses, all but one still privately occupied (the Munros, who found a box containing legal writs dating back to the early 14th century, have been at Foulis for 1,000 years), spans four centuries and illustrates the changing tastes and influences that their owners—mostly enterprising merchants, lawyers, soldiers and statesmen—aspired to as they built their family seats. Many set precedents in the way they responded to

landscape, as at Balcaskie and Lochinch, 'the ultimate Scottish Baronial house—a massing of ranges and wings... above the shoreline of the White Loch'.

James Fennell's sumptuous photography brings these houses alive. Focusing on interiors, he captures the texture of fabrics, the virtuosity of plasterwork, the fall of light on timber panelling. Architectural shots are juxtaposed with atmospheric details, from gilded pelmets to curling stones; spectacular portraits, family snaps and images of boudoir ephemera add to the rich mix.

The selection ranges from the ducal treasurehouses of Drumlanrig and Bowhill, and the *cause célèbre* of the Adams' Dumfries House, 'one of the most complete documents of Enlightenment taste in Scotland', to houses that have never featured before, such as The House of the Binns; Balcaskie, former seat of Sir William Bruce, father of Scottish Classicism; and Monzie Castle, Perthshire, remodelled by Lorimer after a fire destroyed all but two suits of armour in 1908. 'Fire can never be anything but an enemy, but full insurance and wisdom in reconstruction are, to say the least, cheerful compensations,' COUNTRY LIFE commented wryly.



The Bowhill boudoir is 'a glittering casket of a room, lined with old Chinese wallpaper and laden with silks, fringes, and needlepoint'