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CAUSEY CLASH*
OF KIRK, TOWN AND COLLEGE, 1747-48

IAIN GORDON BROWN

DESCRIPTIONS OF EDINBURGH and Edinburgh life are legion. Many unpublished documents lie buried among the great collections of manuscript letters in the National Library of Scotland and Edinburgh University Library. By and large, however, these are at least indexed, and so can be found by those interested. More unusual is the letter about Edinburgh characters and Edinburgh society which is hidden away in a context where none would think to look and where there is no index entry to direct the searcher. Among the voluminous papers of that quintessentially English eccentric, the antiquary William Stukeley, are to be found two letters the Edinburgh interest of which – slight certainly, but appealing nonetheless – has not been deemed worthy of notice by the cataloguers of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.¹

The writer of the letters was Cornwall Tathwell, a young medical student, aged about 23 in 1747-48. He was a Lincolnshire man: he came from Louth.² His regional connections as well as his medical calling were the factors which account for his friendship with Stukeley, himself a native of that county and a doctor by training, though, when Tathwell wrote, Stukeley had long been in holy orders as the decidedly idiosyncratic rector of All Saints, Stamford, and latterly of St George-the-Martyr, Queen Square, London. The fact that Tathwell, already a Bachelor of Arts of St John's College, Oxford, came to Edinburgh for further study is indicative of the growing reputation of the Medical School in the eighteenth century under the leadership of men like Alexander Monro, *primus*, in Anatomy, and Robert Whytt in the Theory and Practice of Medicine.

Tathwell had evidently arrived in Scotland armed with introductions from William Stukeley to 'two of

the most genteel and agreeable Families in Edinburgh'. These were the Clerks of Penicuik and the Wishart ecclesiastical clan. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, second baronet and a Baron of the Court of Exchequer, was an old friend of Stukeley, their passionate interest in antiquities having brought them together many years before.³ Clerk clearly enjoyed the company of the young man: the baronet came of a family with many medical connections, and was himself an amateur diagnostician ('a piece of a doctor' as he called himself) and one of the great hypochondriacs of the age, to which obsession the 391 medical works in his library stood well-thumbed witness.⁴ When Tathwell left the College after his year there, Clerk wrote to Stukeley: 'I am extremely sorry that your friend Mr Tathwell is to leave us. I thank you for making me acquainted with this young man, for he is extremely deserving, and has the good wishes of all who knew him'.⁵

Sir John had found that it was possible to ride in daily from his villa at Mavisbank near Loanhead to Edinburgh when the Exchequer Court was sitting; for most of the year he lived at his seat of Newbiggin on the Penicuik estate. But other members of the Clerk family were resident in Edinburgh, and through the Baron Tathwell came to know at least one of Sir John's many sons, and also one of his brothers. Of Baron Clerk, Tathwell wrote to Stukeley in October 1747:

He received me very graciously, recommended me to ye acquaintance of one of his sons who is a fellow pupil with me under Dr. Whyt, and last Thursday sent for me to dine with him. The Baron has a brother a Merch^t here who has a fine Genius for Music and is an excellent composer: he does me ye favour to admit me now and then to ye Concert of which he is one of the Managers.

The son in question must be the young man who was to grow to fame as John Clerk of Eldin, the artist,

* 'Causey clash' = street talk or gossip:

The Scots Thesaurus (Aberdeen 1990), p. 427.

scientist and naval tactician. At the time Tathwell wrote, he was a student of medicine at Edinburgh: of him the Baron said that he would 'prove a top chyrurgeon',⁶ though in fact other disciplines came to claim his attention and he did not much longer pursue these studies. The brother of the Baron to whom Tathwell alludes is Hugh Clerk, of whom Sir John wrote that he 'play'd on the violincello with all the perfection of the greatest Master, and rather too well for a Gentleman'.⁷ Baron Clerk was himself an extremely accomplished musician, having in his youth been a pupil of Corelli. But he considered that to play in public, and to be known as a composer, was in some way inconsistent with the dignity of a gentleman and a judge; and so, unlike his brother, he kept a fairly low profile in the musical life of Edinburgh. Doubtless, however, he will have been able to advise Tathwell on the best contacts to make in that world. Hugh was also a Director of the Edinburgh Assembly in 1746.⁸

Professor Robert Whytt had been appointed to the chair of the Institutes of Medicine in the year in which Tathwell arrived in Edinburgh. A man described as 'a bright luminary in the rising university', and as one who has left 'a name great in the history of physiological science',⁹ Whytt was particularly noted for his work on the treatment of that great disease of the age, the 'stone' or 'gravel'. It may be that young Tathwell was entertained by Clerk to a private view of the Baron's collection of specimens of the gravel of his various friends and relations, some of which survives to this day in neatly labelled boxes in the charter room at Penicuik House.

For the Wishart family Tathwell conceived a great admiration. William Wishart was Principal of the University from 1737 to 1753, his father William having held the office before him.¹⁰ He was also minister of the Tron parish, second charge. His younger brother George had been minister of the Tron Kirk since 1730, and was also principal clerk of Assembly. He became Moderator in 1748. 'The

Principal', wrote Tathwell, 'is a facetious Gentleman and well versed in the Belles Lettres; he is minister of the Tron Kirk, which is ye largest and best frequented of any in this city, & his brother M^r Geo. Wishart a justly celebrated Preacher'. In a second letter in May 1748, Tathwell set out for Stukeley some observations on the governance of the Church of Scotland:

As to present news, the General Assembly of the Kirk are sitting at present, which consist of 2 clergymen to one lay elder, sent more or less in proportion from every presbytery. The Earl of Leven, the king's commissioner, has £2000 to sit under a canopy of state, and be a witness of their proceedings.¹¹ Principal Wishart often speaks in their debates; his brother was last year made their clerk, which is a place for life of £100 per ann: and is at present chosen their moderator, and presides over their debates, about which they are sometimes so eager, that it is a common saying here among the wags, that they have a law among them for not above 15 to speak at once.

Whereas he mentioned here those who did well for themselves through service to church and state, Tathwell had described in his first letter, of October 1747, a person for whom loyalty to a cause had far outweighed any thought of material gain:

We have a Lady lives here who is very remarkable for assisting the Pretender in his Escape, Miss Flora M'Donald. She looks very young and is tolerably handsome. A gentleman was over heard the other night at a public place offering to wait on her home with these remarkable words 'Come, Miss, I'll preserve you because you preserved my Master.' But in general, from what I have seen and heard, I have reason to believe there is a majority here of ye well affected.¹²

Connections between the academic world of the Medical Faculty and the social life of Edinburgh and Scotland may seem tenuous. However, the famous Dr Monro, *primus*, often regarded as the father of the Edinburgh medical school, has been characterised as 'very social and "clubable"', and distinguished for his amiability.¹³ Dr Andrew Plummer, Professor of Medicine and Chemistry, analysed Moffat water, and in so doing popularised that spring and led to its prominence as a health resort, with all the fashions and foibles of the brittle world of the Georgian spa. Something of this lesser-known social side of the

Medical Faculty is reflected in an anecdote retailed by Tathwell: 'You'll think it an odd piece of academical news when I tell you our Professor of Chemistry Dr Plummer broke his *tendo Achillis* by dancing one night

in a merry fit. This accident obliges him to lecture in his own house at present and it is remarkable that one of ye same kind happen'd to ye Professor of Anatomy, Mr Monro, about three years ago ...'

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. Misc. c. 114, letters from Tathwell in Stukeley Correspondence, Vol. II, 5 October 1747 and 14 May 1748.
- 2 On Tathwell, see Joseph Foster (ed.), *Alumni Oxonienses: the Members of the University of Oxford, 1715-1886*, 4 vols (Oxford 1888), IV, p. 1389. Tathwell later took the Oxford degrees of MA (1749), BMed (1751) and DMed (1755).
- 3 On Clerk's antiquarian activities and friendships see Iain Gordon Brown, 'Critick in Antiquity: Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, 1676-1755', *Antiquity*, 51 (1977), pp. 201-210; and *idem*, *The Hobby-Horsical Antiquary* (Edinburgh 1980).
- 4 Scottish Record Office (SRO), Clerk of Penicuik Muniments, GD18/5245/4/114, Clerk to Laurence Chartres, 12 May 1733; National Library of Scotland, MS. Dep. 187, Clerk of Penicuik Library Catalogue.
- 5 Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. Misc. c. 113, f. 112.
- 6 SRO, GD18/5396/67, Sir John Clerk to his son George, 13 March [1747]; cf. also GD18/5396/69, 19 March 1748.
- 7 *Memoirs of the Life of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik*, edited by J. M. Gray, Scottish History Society, Vol. XIII (Edinburgh 1892), p. 222. The 'Minutes of the Procedure of the Governour and Directors of the Musickall Society', preserved in the Music Room of Edinburgh Central Public Library, show that the Clerk family were strongly represented in the membership from the earliest days (Vol. I, ff. 8, 12, 21; Vol. II, f. 72).
- 8 David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1972), p. 12 n; see also James H. Jamieson, 'Social Assemblies of the Eighteenth Century', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 19 (1933), pp. 31-91.
- 9 Sir Alexander Grant, *The Story of the University of Edinburgh*, 2 vols (London 1884), II, p. 401.
- 10 *Ibid*, II, pp. 263-265; see also Hew Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, new edn (Edinburgh 1915), Vol. I, pp. 136-37.
- 11 Alexander, 5th Earl of Leven and 4th Earl of Melville (c. 1699-1754), Commissioner 1741-53.
- 12 Flora MacDonald had received her liberty in 1747 under the Act of Indemnity, having previously been imprisoned in the Tower and having lived in custody in London. Tathwell's letter relates to the period before Flora returned to Skye.
- 13 Grant, *Story of the University*, II, p. 386.