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SURPASSING EXPECTATIONS:  
AN EAST ANGLIAN VISITOR'S REPORT OF 1790

IAIN GORDON BROWN

IN THE BRITISH LIBRARY, catalogued as Additional Manuscripts 35126–33, are eight volumes of original letters addressed to Arthur Young (1741–1820), the agriculturist and celebrated observer of the French Revolution. In several of these volumes are letters, preserved as single items or as groups, which are from one 'J. S.'; and, of these, one series (Add. MSS. 35127, ff. 31–63v) consists of letters from a tour of the north of England and Scotland made in the summer of 1790.

J. S. himself evidently belonged to Suffolk, and he writes to his friend Young at Bradfield Hall, near Bury St Edmunds. Like his correspondent, he was exceptionally interested in and knowledgeable about agriculture, and he was likewise familiar with France. Owing to a peculiarity of indexing, there is no way that a reader may easily establish the identity of the writer of these letters. The catalogue description gives no clue. And although, in the index to the Additional Manuscripts, the letters are indeed attributed to the correct person, who appears listed under his full name as author of the manuscripts concerned, this fact can only be established by cross-referencing once one has one's self attempted to make the necessary identification, for there is nowhere any correlation between initials and full name: J. S. does not appear indexed as such. So recourse must be had to identification by means of the wax seal impression preserved on many of the documents.

The crest used for the seal is a sea-creature devouring another, or, in armorial blazon, 'a dolphin naiant vorant a fish'. By using standard heraldic reference works one may narrow a search down to a certain number of families whose crest this – or a

variant – was, and the field is further limited if only those families with names beginning with S are considered. Of these, some fourteen in number, the connection with Suffolk may define the search yet more narrowly. The choice of Symonds may be made, and thereafter the specific family member may be fixed by reference to the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

The writer of the letters was John Symonds (1729–1807), Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge – in which chair he succeeded Thomas Gray, the poet – and Fellow of Trinity College. Symonds had set off on 7 July 1790 from Bury St Edmunds on his extensive tour, on which he sent back to Young detailed reports in the form of journal letters. These concentrated on agricultural matters, but Symonds also had a keen eye for landscape and architecture, and was interested in all manner of social and economic observation. His turn of phrase was whimsical and his description lively: thus, for example, he was to describe Moffat spa as 'the Baiae of Scotland'.

Symonds seems to have spent some ten days in and around Edinburgh. His arrival coincided with the climax of a period of intense building activity, an economic and social phenomenon well described in the letters, during which the grid pattern of streets and squares proposed by James Craig in the 1760s had largely taken form.

The First New Town – 'the new city of Edinburgh', as Symonds calls it – was shortly to be completed with the building of Charlotte Square to the designs of Robert Adam. The architect, evidently a personal friend of Symonds, was also responsible for the two public buildings specifically mentioned

with satisfaction by the East Anglian visitor. The tone of familiarity used by Symonds when writing of Adam suggests that their acquaintance was of some long standing and a degree of intimacy. However it is also possible that Symonds may have come to know the architect during negotiations for Adam's projected but unbuilt work at Cambridge: Adam's scheme included ranges of buildings for King's College and also University development around the Old Schools, which (among other things) would have furnished Cambridge with a splendid new library.<sup>1</sup> We know that Symonds was a benefactor of the University Library;<sup>2</sup> and so it may well be that it was in this regard that he had formed his acquaintance with Adam.

Robert Adam spent the months of May to October 1790 in and around Edinburgh, with some excursions further afield.<sup>3</sup> By this time his work on the Register House – the dome of which is singled out for especial praise by Symonds – should have been nearing completion, and indeed the building was being furnished that very year. But in fact much of the building was unfinished.<sup>4</sup> Other commissions, in addition, engaged the architect's attention: the University – a building intimately associated in Symonds's mind with its creator – and furthermore Archerfield House, Seton Castle, Culzean Castle, Gosford House, Dunbar Castle (the Earl of Lauderdale's 'snug place') and also schemes for the Advocates' Library and the Court of Session.<sup>5</sup> By the year's end he had been approached for a design for Charlotte Square, though Symonds does not in so many words link that development with the name of Adam.

Nor is the David Hume mausoleum attributed to Symonds's friend. This is interesting, because Symonds clearly states that Adam had submitted a design which had been rejected by the executors of the philosopher, presumably on grounds of cost, and

that a monument had then been erected 'according to their own taste'. Symonds condemned the result as 'an ugly cylinder', or a round bastion. In all this Symonds is both wide of the mark, and spot-on. The mausoleum is indeed an Adam design, although no drawing for the tomb exactly as built survives in the Soane Museum. Much of Symonds's criticism could be echoed in other writing of the period and later: clearly he found it impossible to believe that it could be the work of his friend. Many visitors, ranging from Adam Smith to tourists who had no direct knowledge either of Hume or of the architect, failed to give approbation to the final design; and indeed the cylindrical form has regularly led to the mausoleum's being confused with neighbouring buildings in castellated style.<sup>6</sup>

It is significant that, whereas Adam is mentioned in glowing terms, James Craig, the designer of the First New Town, is never mentioned by name, and is alluded to only in the context of his unsatisfactory Observatory.<sup>7</sup> The projected building on Calton Hill, begun in 1776, had been bedevilled by indecision and shortage of funds, and would be completed in modified form only in the two years after Symonds's visit.

It should be noted that by 'palisades' Symonds means the sunk areas of the houses between the building line and the pavement or 'trottoir' and delimited by railings, to which, of course, the word must strictly apply. The fact that Symonds, the Francophile traveller, uses 'trottoir' may be due to the novelty of the idea in France: pavements, as territory reserved for pedestrians, were an innovation in the Paris of the 1780s.<sup>8</sup> By 'pavement' Symonds means the metalled surfaces of the streets.

Symonds highlights the spirit of civic improvement at large, and indicates its dual character: on the one hand, the laying out of the regular grid-iron pattern of streets athwart the low



ridge of Bareford's Parks and the Lang Dykes, on which ground George Street, Queen Street and Princes Street, together with the terminal squares and minor streets, were unrolled; and, on the other, the development of the North and South Bridges in the Old Town. However, the simplicity of his comments on the 'improvement' of the Old Town belies what was, in fact, an extremely complex and convoluted episode in urban history.<sup>9</sup>

In alluding to the possible volcanic origin of Arthur's Seat – and in stating his clear belief in the probability of those theories on the origin and nature of the earth and its rocks advanced by James Hutton – Symonds touches upon a very significant scientific controversy of the day (and one, for that matter, which was to run for many years thereafter). That the geological phenomena of Edinburgh, in the *loci classici* of Arthur's Seat, Salisbury Crags, Samson's Ribs and other localities, should have occasioned a 'war among the antiquaries' is stating no less than the truth. Symonds's somewhat quaint description of this great debate will cause the modern geologist and historian of science to smile knowingly, and may send him back to the accounts by (for example) Barthélemy Faujas de St Fond, James Nasmyth, William Henry Fitton and Charles Darwin, of their own witness to the battle of the Huttonians and Wernerians – 'Vulcanists' and 'Neptunists' – as protagonists of the theories of fire and flood.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that Hutton had as a young man studied agriculture and husbandry on a farm in East Anglia. This practical experience included a spell in Suffolk; and so it is not impossible that he had met Young and Symonds as amateurs of agriculture, and that there may be in any such early acquaintance the seed of a partiality on Symonds's part towards views entertained by Hutton when wielding a geological hammer in place of a spade or hoe. Indeed it was apparently while in East Anglia that Hutton's interest

in geology had developed.<sup>11</sup>

Symonds's point about the consequence of 'Oriental wealth' for the economic and architectural development of late eighteenth century Edinburgh is interesting. Certainly the nabob, returned from Eastern exile, was a recognised figure in the social life of the city by the beginning of the nineteenth century: these 'returned Indians' (as Jessie Allan was to call them) were famously wealthy, having 'shaken the pagoda-tree'.<sup>12</sup> Symonds's assertion must carry some weight of truth.

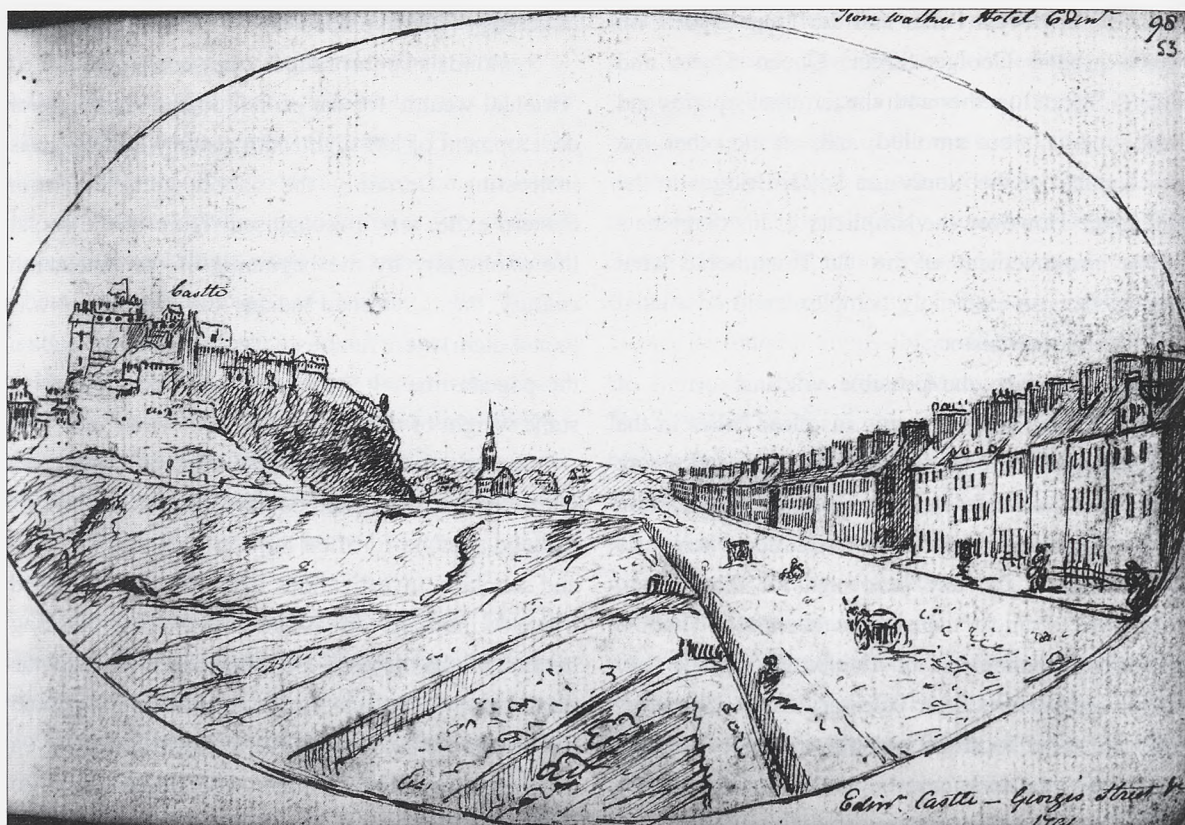
Appropriately for an English academic, Symonds interested himself in the development of the Town's College, and he fortified himself in his sightseeing and scholarly investigations with the wine and good living so intimately identified with the high-thinking leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment. He had the disappointment of not meeting Principal William Robertson, and so was unable to report to Young on his having drained a bumper with a man who had clashed with no less an opponent than Dr Johnson on the subject of the beneficial effects of drinking claret.

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Folio 31 of Add. MSS. 35127 contains an arch introduction to the series of journal letters quoted below:

... as the Divine is often too fond of bending every thing to his own notions, so the voyage-writer is too apt to accommodate the objects which he examines to his own ideas – but this perhaps is rashly said, and can be applied to those only, who publish the result of their travels: for it is well known, that a Journal-writer is totally exempt from all faults; and has two peculiar excellencies: an unbiassed regard for truth, and a graceful negligence both in his diction & sentiment – Allons, allons, Monsieur, let me see whether I can pace safely in these trammels.

3 August 1790 [f.38]: What is very singular, is, that tho' part of this city is seated on a high rock, we cannot see it till the moment



Princes Street in 1791. This almost exactly contemporary drawing illustrates some of the points made by Symonds in his journal letters. Symonds mentions that the hotels were located in the New Town, and this sketch by Major-General John Brown is taken from one of them, Walker's in Princes Street. Some liberties seem to have been taken with the exact viewpoint. Walker's Hotel was at No. 1 Princes Street, south side; but this sketch appears to have been drawn from a side window set back a little from the street – other buildings in the block on this corner of Princes Street would actually have been in the way. 'Palisades' and 'trottoirs' are clearly visible. Note the name given to the street, which indicates something of the general confusion between the projected, rejected, altered and adapted names of the principal streets of the New Town. (From a sketchbook of Major-General John Brown, National Library of Scotland, MS. 8026.)

we enter it; for it is wholly enclavée between Carlton [*sic*] Hill & Arthur's Seat. On the first has been built an observatory, which did not answer, & will not probably be finished.

Here is erected a monument to Hume, with a simple inscription, *David Hume*, by his own desire. He bequeathed a small summ for that purpose, & the Exors. had a plan from my friend Adam; but grudging the money, caused one to be erected according to their own taste, which appears from the city to be an ugly Cylinder, or a rounded corner of a bastion.

[f. 38v] Arthur's Seat hath occasioned a war among the antiquaries, who are not determined whether it hath been the effect of a Volcano: tho' the basaltic pentagons seem to put it beyond all doubt, that it was caused by explosion of fire.

10 August 1790 [f. 39]: If a traveller have no other view than to

examine the face of a country, he cannot but be abundantly satisfied with his journey from Edinburgh to Queen's ferry: some romantic scenes on the banks of the water of Leith, as it is called, which forms the harbour of Leith: the ground every where well-broken, inclosed & planted: the distant as well as near prospects agreeable; and a great show of magnificence in crossing the Forth about 2 miles in breadth, where Lord Hopton's noble mansion and woods are distinctly seen. All these circumstances, however, will not be thought by a curious inquirer to compensate the bad state of agriculture, which is far inferior to that on the E. side of Edinburgh.

13 August 1790 [f. 41]: I must now drop the journalist and degenerate into an epistolary writer. It would appear a little extraordinary to tell you, that I drank one bottle of claret on such



a day with Professor A, and 2 bottles on such a day with Professor B, & so on; yet this must be the routine, if I were to be methodical as usual, for it is actually true.

I had heard much of the new city of Edinburgh, as it is called; but it has much surpassed my expectations, as other things have fallen short of them. Figure to yourself three streets in breadth [*sic*] from 1/2 to 1/3 of a mile, running parallel to one another, built of a good-coloured stone. One of the outer streets is on the banks of the Forth, & nothing can appear more romantic. The middle, or George Street, is 100 f. broad from house to house, & 60 f. if we allow 10 f. for the palisades, & 10 more for the trottoir. I have not seen such a street in any city whatever. The whole is terminated E & W by 2 squares, one of which is called St Andrew's, about as large as Cavendish Square, is completed, & the other is just begun. Many very fine houses, with good architecture, in the three streets, & not one, tho' designed for tradesmen, is unhandsome. Detached parts in London, or other cities, might possibly be put together to equal them, but such a contrived mass of excellent buildings I never beheld. You will naturally ask, whence could this expense be supplied? It could not arise from the increase of wealth in the inhabitants, for tho' Edinburgh hath about 100,000 taking in Leith & its other suburbs, & tho' it has some manufactures of woollen cloth, stuffs, & sattins, yet it cannot [f. 41v] justly be called a trading city; nor can it be ascribed to the flourishing state of the University; for £40,000 a year, which the students & their friends are supposed to spend, could not afford a sufficient fund. The truth is, it is the consequence of Oriental wealth. Numberless petty nabobs, whose names we never hear of, have brought home from 40, to 70 or £80,000 during these last 30 years. Their younger sons,

having had no house or property of their own, sought for a residence in the Capital, which could not be furnished by the ordinary buildings.

The magistrates of Edinburgh have not been deficient in doing their utmost to improve the old part of the town, by taking down whole streets, removing nuisances, & building noble bridges over the ravines. The foundations of the new College are laid, which indisputably will be the most elegant & magnificent fabric in its kind throughout all Europe.

The hotels are in the new buildings, as clean & commodious, and I may add too, as dear as in London. The hackney coaches, with their horses, are in general much better than with us.

I had recommendation to many of the literati. Dr Robertson was just set out on a journey to England, which I had cause to regret; but I saw much of Dr Blair, Macknight, Hardie, &c. who were truly hospitable;<sup>13</sup> but what gave the greatest pleasure, I found there my friend Adam, the architect, who is solely employed in building the new college; and who had the only management of the Register Office, where is the most beautiful dome (next to St Paul's) that is to be seen in this island.

The pavement of the town is excellent, & kept very clean, and is not likely to be much hurt by carriages, as there are no carts drawn by single horses.

[f. 42] In proportion to wealth, luxury hath increased, & poverty among the lower people. You well know, that all are supported by voluntary contributions; but these have been found so inadequate of late, that the community is £4000 in debt: this induces them to think of establishing a kind of poor's rates as with us, which I advised the Lord Provost to avoid if possible.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 On Adam's work at Cambridge see A. T. Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, 2 vols (London 1922), II, pp. 173–180; and James Lees-Milne, *The Age of Adam* (London 1947), pp. 137–140.
- 2 David McKitterick, *Cambridge University Library: A History, Vol. II: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge 1986), pp. 13, 744n.
- 3 Margaret H. B. Sanderson, *Robert Adam and Scotland: Portrait of an Architect* (Edinburgh 1992), pp. 119–121.
- 4 *Idem*, 'A Proper Repository': *The Building of the General Register House* (Edinburgh 1992), pp. 10–12.
- 5 On Adam's various commissions see David King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam* (Oxford 1991). See also Andrew G. Fraser, *The Building of Old College: Adam, Playfair and the University of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1989), *passim*, and Iain Gordon Brown, *Building for Books: The Architectural Evolution of the Advocates' Library* (Aberdeen 1989), pp. 62–75.
- 6 See Iain Gordon Brown, 'David Hume's Tomb: A Roman Mausoleum by Robert Adam', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 121 (1991), pp. 391–422.
- 7 On the Observatory see Anthony Lewis, Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser, 'Descriptive List of Works and Projects by James Craig', in Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser (eds), *James Craig, 1744–1795* (Edinburgh 1995), pp. 108–109.
- 8 Cf. Clotilde Lefebvre (ed.), *Paris* (Everyman Guide, English edition, London 1995), pp. 36, 52.
- 9 For a detailed and well illustrated account of these

- developments see Fraser, *Old College* (note 5), chapter 3 ('Robert Adam and the South Bridge Scheme').
- 10 The Huttonian cause (emphasising the role of volcanic action) was ably led by Professor John Playfair in his *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory* (Edinburgh 1802). Professor Robert Jameson was the leading Scottish advocate of the Wernerian theory (which concentrated on the role of water in erosion and deposition of rocks).
- 11 See Jean Jones, 'James Hutton's Agricultural Researches and his Life as a Farmer', *Annals of Science*, 42 (1985), pp. 573-601; and Dennis R. Dean, *James Hutton and the History of Geology* (Ithaca and London 1992), pp. 3-6.
- 12 See Iain Gordon Brown, *Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh: The Harden Drawings* (Edinburgh 1995), pp. 23-24.
- 13 Hugh Blair (1718-1800), Minister of the High Kirk and Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the University of Edinburgh; James Macknight (1721-1800), Minister of the Old Church and a 'learned and laborious' (*DNB*) Biblical critic; Thomas Hardy (or Hardie) (1746-1798), Minister of the New North Church and Professor of Church History in the University.
- 14 (Sir) James Stirling, Lord Provost in 1790-91, 1794-95 and 1798-99.