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JAMES CRAIG, 1739–1795:  
CORRECTION OF HIS DATE OF BIRTH

KITTY CRUFT

IN 1995 A BOOK was published, and an exhibition held at the Edinburgh City Art Centre, to mark the bicentenary of the death in 1795 of James Craig, the winner of the competition for a plan for the New Town of Edinburgh in August 1766.<sup>1</sup> The book was boldly entitled *James Craig 1744–1795*, and remarked in a number of places on Craig's youth at the time of his success – apparently not quite twenty two years of age. This short note explains the complicated process by which it has now been established that he was actually born in October 1739, making him a more convincing twenty six. The editors trust that the contents of the book will be found to be more reliable than its title!

During research for the book it became clear that a more thorough genealogical search should be made for Craig's ancestors. His family tree was traced back to the baptism of Robert Craig in Kelso, Roxburghshire, in 1662, the son of James Craig and Janet Waldie.<sup>2</sup> Robert Craig became an Edinburgh merchant, and was a man of some standing, having been Merchant Councillor, College Treasurer, Baron-Bailie of Leith and Baron-Bailie of the Canongate. In 1714 he was made Dean of Guild, an appointment that was to have much influence on the later education of James Craig, his grandson.<sup>3</sup>

The research also confirmed the entry in the Old Parochial Registers for Edinburgh, recording James Craig's birth on 31 October 1744, and his baptism on Tuesday (the day is later found to be significant) 13 November 1744 (see fig.).<sup>4</sup> He was registered to William Craig, merchant in Edinburgh (though not a very successful one), who became a

burgess by right of his father Robert Craig. James Craig's mother was Mary Thomson, a sister of James Thomson (1700–1748), poet and author of *The Seasons*, one of the most popular of English poems, immensely influential in style and subject, contributing to the late eighteenth century interest in the picturesque. James and Mary Thomson were born in Ednam, Roxburghshire, only two miles from Kelso, children of the Rev. Thomas Thomson, minister of Ednam, and Beatrix Trotter, daughter of Mr Trotter of Fogo, a minor laird.<sup>5</sup> Beatrix was left a widow in 1718, and brought her family to Edinburgh, as a better place to provide for them. She was described as a 'person of uncommon natural endowments, possessed of every social and domestic virtue and with a vivacious and warm personality'.<sup>6</sup> The Craig and Thomson families must have known each other in the social and business life of Kelso.

There was no reason in 1995 to assume that the dates of James Craig's birth and baptism were in doubt, although, as research progressed into his life, his time at George Watson's Hospital, his apprenticeship to Deacon Patrick Jamieson, and later references to his approximate age, there was some uncertainty as to whether the admission to Watson's Hospital and apprenticeship might not be associated with another James Craig – for example, on his indenture with Jamieson in 1755 he would have been only eleven years old. A search was made at that time for the earliest registration book for admissions to George Watson's Hospital, but none was found. However, by chance, during a more recent (unrelated) search, the original registers were rediscovered in



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 Tuesday 13. Novem<sup>r</sup>. 1744  
 To William Craig mer<sup>t</sup> in Edinburgh  
 and Mary Thomson his Spouse a.S.M.  
 James W. John Gusthart Son of  
 M<sup>r</sup>. William Gusthart one of the Ministers  
 of this City, John Stewart Barber and  
 wig maker, and Patrick Drummond  
 Mer<sup>t</sup> in Edin<sup>r</sup>. Child was born the  
 31<sup>st</sup> of October last, and Baptised by  
 the Rev<sup>d</sup>. M<sup>r</sup>. Robert Wallace one of  
 the Ministers of this City.

Entry in the Old Parochial Register recording the birth of James Craig 'on 31st October last', and his subsequent baptism by Rev. Robert Wallace. The registration was witnessed by John Gusthart, son of Rev. William Gusthart; John Stewart, barber and wig-maker; and Patrick Drummond, merchant. The entry is dated 'Tuesday 13 November': reasons are advanced in the text for suggesting that '1744' was added later in error. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Registrar General for Scotland.)

George Watson's School Library, having been temporarily lost in a 'safe place' at the time of the 1995 exhibition and book.

The relevant entry is No. 44 from the 'Register of the Names of the Boys Elected and Received into George Watson's Hospital from the Commencement thereof at Whitsunday 1741'.<sup>7</sup> The entries are spread over two large folio pages, and record Craig's date of election as 4 April 1748, the son of William Craig, merchant burgher, and grandson of Dean of Guild [Robert] Craig. His date of birth, given as 31 October 1739, would make him a plausible eight years old. The opposite page records the date of his sixteenth birthday (when a boy must leave the school) as

31 October 1755, together with the actual date of leaving, 2 May 1755, and his subsequent apprenticeship with Patrick Jamieson, mason in Edinburgh. Finally, in the last column, is recorded his time of arrival as a fully-fledged mason, aged 25, on 31 October 1764, and the payment of his bounty on 16 January 1769.<sup>8</sup> Craig's date of birth is also confirmed elsewhere in the Watson's Hospital records, from his first appearance before the Governors of the Hospital, when his certificate of birth was produced and recorded as 31 October 1739.<sup>9</sup>

With genealogical help, Craig's baptismal entry in the Old Parochial Registers was re-examined, and



found to be recorded on a small page by itself, as most of them seemed to be at this period. *The Detailed List for the Old Parochial Registers*, published in 1872, points out that the record of Edinburgh baptisms from December 1731 to January 1759 has not been written out at full length, but a draft, or 'scroll', record exists in twelve volumes: Nos 18-29 cover the period of January 1729 to December 1758. With the help of Bruno Longmore, Departmental Record Officer in the General Register Office for Scotland at New Register House, the relevant pages were examined. They were found to have signs of fine stitching, showing that the 'Craig' page had formerly been a leaf in a book, but had been cut out and pasted into the standard baptismal

volume, though at what date is not known. Alison Mowat has suggested that the baptisms may have been recorded on separate leaves, then sewn together into book form, but with the page recording Craig's birth misplaced. Her credible solution was that 'the session clerk obviously had to find a year in which 13 November was a Tuesday, if that date was written at the top of the page as the baptismal date with no year attached. After 1739, the next time that happened was in 1744.'<sup>10</sup>

The entry in the original baptismal register must stand as 1744, as part of the historic record. However, the *New Dictionary of National Biography* (yet to be published), has accepted 1739 as James Craig's new date of birth.<sup>11</sup>

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser (eds), *James Craig, 1744-1795, 'The Ingenious Architect of the New Town of Edinburgh'* (Edinburgh 1995).
- 2 General Register Office for Scotland (GROS). Old Parochial Registers (OPR), Kelso 793/2.
- 3 Helen Armet (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1701-1718* (Edinburgh 1967).
- 4 GROS, OPR. Edinburgh 685/1/24 f.130.
- 5 See Kitty Cruft and Anthony Lewis, 'James Craig: A Biographical Sketch', chapter 1 in Cruft and Fraser, *James Craig*.
- 6 'Life of James Thomson', introduction to *James Thomson's Poetical Works* (Edinburgh 1871).
- 7 George Watson's College Library, Vol. 1, entry 44. 4 April 1748.
- 8 Watson's Hospital paid a bounty to each pupil on leaving the hospital, and a further bounty at age 25 on production of a certificate of good character.
- 9 George Watson's College Library, Minutes of George Watson's Hospital begun 19 November 1744 (ending 1756), Petition for James Craig, 19 May 1755: Indenture betwixt Pat. Jamieson and James Craig.
- 10 Alison Mowat, 'James Craig and an Edinburgh Baptismal Entry', *Scottish Genealogist*, March 2000, pp. 3-5.
- 11 Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser, 'James Craig', *New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, in press).