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James A. Mackay

Two Hitherto Unrecorded Letters of Allan Ramsay



In 1974 I purchased a scrapbook consisting of a foolscap volume whose folios bear the watermark of W & M Mills, dated 1821. About half of the volume had been occupied with historic letters which were pasted in. There was no inscription on the fly-leaf, so the name of the person who had compiled this collection is not known. From external evidence, however, it has been deduced that the collection was formed some time in the 1820s by John Clerk Maxwell of Middlebie and Glenlair who died in 1856. He was an advocate, younger brother of Sir George Clerk-Maxwell of Penicuik and father of the celebrated physicist, James Clerk Maxwell.

Originally the scrapbook comprised about 80 documents. A number of them have been removed for incorporation in my reference collection of eighteenth-century postmarks, although a meticulous record of items removed from the scrapbook has been kept.

Of the remaining 61 items which have been left *in situ*, the vast majority are individual letters, although there are three diaries and a 32-foolscap-page genealogical account, with diagrams, tracing the history of the family which presumably owned the scrapbook originally. The genealogy traces their descent from Homer Maxwell and Janet Gordon, who married in 1547. Agnes Maxwell of Middlebie married William

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Clerk. Their daughter, Dorothea Clerk-Maxwell, heiress of Middlebie, married her cousin George Clerk of Dumcrieff, to whom many of the letters, dating between the 1740s and 1778, were addressed.

The genealogical account is undated and tails off in the late 1790s, but significantly it is written on double foolscap sheets watermarked BF & Co., dated 1821 like the scrapbook pages themselves.

The genealogical account sheds light on the family whose letters have been preserved in the scrapbook. The recipient of the majority of the letters, George Clerk, was born on October 31, 1715, at Edinburgh and by letters to him from his father and mother appears to have been at school, first at Dalkeith and afterwards at Mr Wilkinson's school at Lowther near Penrith in Cumberland. Later he studied at the College of Edinburgh and subsequently at Leiden. He was privately married to his cousin and as part of the marriage settlement Baron Clerk disposed the lands of Dumcrieff (sometimes spelled Drumcrieff) to him on December 28, 1737. A Crown charter was granted of these lands in favor of George Clerk accordingly, on February 13, 1738, followed by sasine February 25, 1738. About this time he and his wife settled at Dumcrieff and they also resided a good deal at Dumfries where their first child Agnes appears to have been born in September 1739.

George Clerk engaged in various mining ventures, such as the lead mine at Machermore near Newton Stewart and the copper mine on the ridge of the Green Lowther. From the expenses attendant on a numerous family and his ruinous mining speculation, he ran up very substantial debts. These were discharged by the execution of a trust disposition in favor of Alexander Farquharson, an Edinburgh accountant, dated April 9, 1782. To pay off his creditors poor George was forced to convey the lands of Dumcrieff and Middlebie and part of his other means and expectations arising from the hopes he had of succeeding to the estate of Penicuik. His elder brother, Sir James Clerk, was a considerable creditor and in order that all the "stranger creditors" might be more expeditiously paid he agreed to postpone his claims to theirs. As a result of this arrangement the other creditors were soon paid off, but the lands of Dumcrieff and Middlebie had to be sold. Dumcrieff was purchased by John Loudoun Macadam, the road-builder, and in the early 1800s came into the hands of Dr. James Currie, Burns's biographer. Sir James having no children, George in due course inherited the Penicuik estate and the baronetcy. Sir George Clerk died on January 29, 1784 and was succeeded in the estate of Penicuik by his son John. By his wife, Dorothea Clerk-Maxwell, George had five sons and four daughters. His heir, John, a naval officer, died without issue in 1798. A second son, George, an advocate, died unmarried. The third son, James, entered the naval service of the East

India Company and died in 1793. Two other sons, William and Robert, and four daughters completed this large family. The genealogy ends with the death of Lady Dorothea Clerk-Maxwell (widow of Sir George) after a stroke in December 1793, two weeks after the death of her son James.

The earliest document consists of a diary commenced April 28, 1700, annotated by Sir George Clerk as having been written by "Mr William Clerk, my Wife's Father" (i.e. the father of Dorothea Clerk Maxwell of Middlebie, Dumfriesshire). The diary consists of fourteen small pages covered with minuscule handwriting, the last entry being dated March 24, 1703. Fundamentally it is an account of a sojourn in Holland, and includes an interesting drawing of the horse-drawn canal-barges of the period.

A song to the tune of "Greensleeves," comprising 40 lines, is signed "W.C." [William Clerk] and dated June 22, 1719. There is a series of courtship letters from William Clerk to Agnes Maxwell, the earliest (dated September 15, 1718) being signed "Damon," (cf. Burns's "Sylvander"); later letters in the series, after marriage had taken place, begin "My dearest Life" and end "Your most affectionate loving Husband, Will Clerk." In the 1720s William was writing from his family estate in Penicuik to his wife at her lodgings in the Castle Hill, Edinburgh.

Contemporary with the letters of William Clerk, there are letters from Agnes Clerk to the Laird of Middlebie. Agnes's daughter married Lewis Hay and they were the grandparents of the Lewis Hay who married Margaret Chalmers in 1788 and so dashed the hopes of Robert Burns who had composed *My Peggy's Charms* in her honor. Among the later documents are letters from Lord Garlies, William Craik of Arbigland and the Duke of Queensberry spanning the period from the early 1750s till 1778, the year of the Duke's death. Interestingly there is also a letter, dated October 30, 1778, from John Maxwell, then chamberlain at Drumlanrig, concerning the funeral arrangements of "our late most worthy and ever to be revered friend."

Apart from the letters by members of the Maxwell and Clerk families and their friends among the nobility and gentry of Dumfriesshire there are several written by celebrities of the mid-eighteenth century. One, from the pen of the celebrated geologist, Dr. James Hutton, is whimsically (if exasperatingly) dated "Thursday May something Edinr. - nothing," though George Clerk of Dumcrieff has helpfully endorsed it with the year, 1757.

The chief interest, however, lies in two letters from Allan Ramsay. The first is on a double quarto sheet while the second is on a single foolscap sheet folded over. Both bear fragments of a red wax seal bearing a left-facing profile of a bald, bearded Greek figure (Homer?). Both letters have the manuscript endorsement "2" (twopence), indicating

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transmission by post from Edinburgh to Moffat. At that early period no handstruck postmarks were applied at Edinburgh to letters intended for addresses within Scotland.

Dumfries

(1)

To George Clerk of Drumcrieff
Esqr at Drumcrieff near
Moffat

Edr Sepr 30th 1749

Sr

After parting with you I sojourn'd two weeks at Pennycuik¹ and one at Mavisbank² and arrived safe last week in Edr wher I found all things much as I left them the same sauntering on streets, Loitering in Coffeeshouses, great hurry amongst the higher class about dressing & paying & recieving visits—keen looks amongst the Mercantile for chaps & money—the caterpillars of the parliament house who mout³ away broken estates hinging their Luggs for want of opertunity of shewing their industry the Lower class Labouring hard for Dayly Bread & Hony, whigs and Torrys looking asken at un unnither seceding apostles recomending their brethren to the hands of Sathan—preaching goes on as usual every sunday wher some go to shew their braw Claiths some for the fashion, some out of Hypocrise & some to take a nap—the Quiet Philosophers such as Jo Wiliamson⁴ & your humble servt Lovers of Content & Calmnes look down with pity on the folys & faults that

¹Penicuik House, the residence of the Clerk family. The present edifice, however, was not erected until three years after Ramsay's death. Half a mile from the house, on the opposite side of the River North Esk, stands an obelisk to Ramsay, erected by Sir James Clerk to the memory of his own and his father's friend who was a frequent visitor there. Ramsay's friendship with the Clerk family was of long standing. In 1722 he composed an ode on the premature death of a son of Sir John Clerk. Sir John himself composed verses to Susanna Kennedy of Culzean (later Countess of Eglinton) to whom Ramsay dedicated *The Gentle Shepherd*.

²Not identified, but possibly Mavis Grove, in Troqueer parish on the west bank of the River Nith, 2 miles south of Dumfries, later associated with John McMurdo of Drumlanrig and Colonel Arent Schuyler de Peyster, the friends of Burns.

³*Mout*—"to fritter away, to consume bit by bit" (*Scottish National Dictionary*). It is interesting to note that the earliest date cited in the *SND* for this meaning is 1808. I am grateful to Miss Iseabail Macleod for suggesting this reading.

⁴John Williamson, a Moffat farmer. See note 12 of the second letter *infra*.

we cannot amend either by example or precept, for plain it is, when ambition, covetousness, sensuality, Lust & pride & all such head strong passion have taken possession of a sinfull heart and a weak head. The Revelation Hirelings, & even the guileless preachers of that real virtue & Releigion planted in the Hearts of all mankind, will find their labour lost - o foolish Galatians!⁵ but god be thanked there are many good & worthy characters, amongst whom I can freely class you, & the family you belong to, may you, & your Lady, ever Imitate the stock from whence you spring & may your Children you, with my Best wishes to you & yours, I am

Sir, your most humble servt

ALLAN RAMSAY

(2)

To
George Clerk Maxwell⁶ of
Middlebie Esqr at
Drumcrieff near Moffat

Edr Septr 18th 1750

Dear Sir

After a weeks residence at Pennycuik House and and [*sic*] a Sundays admonitions at the Kirk thereof I arrived safe and sound at auld Reekie and found my family all well, I am on a course of visiting—to let my acquaintances know that I am all alive, and find them all much about one as I left them, Holy & affectation appear in as great lusture as ever and sly Rumped⁷ opinion surmounts the powers of Rhime or Reason—Jamie Balfour's⁷ monkey is in top spirit frisking & chatering like any Beau, I was at the last fridays consort wher indeed the musick was so very fine that I did not understand or relish one note of it, but my eyes were blest with the sight of about sixty young charmers all of them in top dress looking sharp out for Yahos with whatever unto them pertaineth—& why no, there were great variety of Beautys there for we must not call any young Lady illfavoured, for every one's tast differs, indeed I did not see above three that I thought Bony

⁵Galatians 3:1.

⁶On obtaining the lands of Middlebie George Clerk adopted his wife's surname of Clerk-Maxwell. He reverted to Clerk on attaining the baronetcy in 1782.

⁷James Balfour (1705-95), the lawyer and philosopher, Treasurer to the Faculty of Advocates and Sheriff-substitute of Edinburgh.

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Some had noses like sun Dials—some had ruefull length of Chin some had too Broad & some too long faces I saw an angell or two that had a good deal of the likeness of the monuments in Pennycuik Kirk yard whose snouts take longnetude for the latitude of their cheeks—I have been atacked by Dunces⁸ who would argue in favour of their Duns well⁹ in preferring it to Moffat's¹⁰ of an old & fixt character I told them that I heard that theirs was only a pudle that cattles urine might give a flavour to, and be very good for such who were prescribed a course of Cow Tea they wondered to hear me tell that Moffat was never thronger of fine Company¹¹, & I insisted much on the excellency of the Hertford new spaw¹² and the great cures it had performd, O this is the well said they found out by the daft man Williamson Daft says I that I wish some folk that set up for witts had the half of his good sence & integrity—be not rash to pass sentence before due examination Silly people may mistake what they do not understand Jo: Williamson is a man of merit & honour with a few odditys that spring from virtue & humanity and are not tinged with vice—my humble Respects to your Lady with my best wishes to her you and family

I am Dr Sir yours

ALLAN RAMSAY

⁸Not here with the meaning of stupid people (after Duns Scotus, the 13th century theologian whose writings were ridiculed in the 16th century), but waggishly applied to the inhabitants of Duns, Berwickshire.

⁹Duns Well, on the Nisbet estate in Edrom parish, whose minister dismissed it: "a number of gentry and nobility formerly resorted to the water; but it is fallen into disrepute." *Statistical Account*, (1791) vol. I, p. 119. Oddly enough, a much fuller account was furnished by the minister of Duns parish (*Statistical Account*, vol. IV, pp. 379-80): "It was discovered in 1747, and was very much resorted to for several years."

¹⁰Moffat Well, 1.25 miles NNE of the town, was discovered in 1633 by Miss Rachel Whiteford, daughter of the Bishop of Brechin. By 1704 people were coming to Moffat, "a small stragglng town" to take the waters, but they were mainly day-trippers as there was little or no accommodation. Dr Sinclair and Dr John Clerk, two Edinburgh physicians, considerably popularized the spa from 1746 onwards.

¹¹The chalybeate wells attracted, among others, John Home, David Hume, James Macpherson, Alexander Carlyle, James Boswell, Joseph Black, Dr Blacklock and Hugh Blair.

¹²A curious misspelling of Hartfell Spa, 5 miles NNE of Moffat, on the south side of Hartfell, in a deep ravine of Auchencat Burn. The spa was discovered in 1748 by John Williamson, who was superintending a mining operation lower down the burn, on behalf of George Clerk at the time. The water was regarded as a powerful tonic "cool and acidulous, specially good for dyspepsia" (*Ordnance Gazetteer*, vol. III, p. 248 [1885]).