4-1-1969

William Robertson and Lord Bute

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William Robertson and Lord Bute

Dr. Johnson's definition has long served as the epitaph of eighteenth century patronage. A patron, he wrote, was "commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery." In the instance of Dr. William Robertson, however, this was scarcely the case. Robertson received wealth and position from his patron, the Earl of Bute, and repaid him with little but gratitude. He met Bute only briefly and never wrote the book which the patronage was intended to support.

Yet the results of this patronage were singularly fortunate. Robertson was surely the foremost historian ever to fill the position of Historiographer Royal in Scotland, and his administration as Principal of the University of Edinburgh was perhaps the most distinguished in the long history of that institution.

Lord Bute, who secured both of these offices for Robertson, is now remembered primarily as the most unpopular of British Prime Ministers, but he was also a major patron of literature and the arts. He obtained Dr. Johnson's pension, employed both Smollett and Hogarth, and was one of the first to perceive the genius of Robert Adam. Much of this patronage was intended not only to glorify the Earl, but also to reflect credit on his pupil, George III, whose father, Prince Frederick, had attempted to revive the idea of royal support of the arts—a notion which had lain dormant under the first two Hanoverians.

Bute's interest in Robertson was originally aroused by the publication of the historian's first book, The History of Scotland, early in 1759. John Home, the Scottish playwright and Bute's former secretary, had given the Earl a pre-publication copy, and Bute was extremely pleased. He encouraged the Prince of Wales and his mother, the Dowager Princess, to read the book, and he wrote Home that:

I have now read again and again your friend's history, and cannot express how much it pleases me; the opening and winding up are magnificent; the characters equal to anything I ever read; and the style noble, animated, and pure. I protest, in my opinion, it stands

Footnote 3: The author would like to express his gratitude to the Marquess of Bute for his permission to examine and quote from the Bute MSS. preserved at Mount Stuart, and to his archivist, Miss Catherine Armet, for her invaluable assistance.
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as the first history in the English tongue. I hope he will hear as much from others; and that, encouraged by the just reward of superior merit, he will procure new laurels by some other masterpiece. . . .

Bute already had some tentative thoughts as to what this “other masterpiece” should be. Using Dr. John Blair as an intermediary, he urged Robertson to write a fuller account of the early period of Scottish history. Robertson had already given up the prospect of a history of England, which Lord Chesterfield had advocated, and he replied to Blair that Bute’s idea had some appeal, particularly since neither of the other topics he was considering (Charles V or ancient Greece) aroused much enthusiasm. He told Blair that he would report his decision in a few weeks, when he returned to Edinburgh from the country.\(^9\)

Robertson never began this history of early Scotland, and the idea was not pursued by Bute. Instead, the historian began collecting materials for his *Charles V* and the Earl spent the remainder of 1759 and most of 1760 in a bitter struggle with his uncle, the Duke of Argyll, for political control of Scotland. When this problem was resolved by the death of George II on October 25, 1760, Bute once again had leisure to develop his envisioned role as the Maecenas of his age. And now, as the new King’s favourite, he could support such a role with almost unlimited official patronage.

Bute was soon reminded of Robertson as a potential recipient of some of this patronage. Toward the end of June, 1761, Lord Cathcart wrote the new Secretary of State, urging him to appoint Robertson one of the King’s Chaplains for Scotland.\(^4\) With Robertson once again brought to his attention, Bute began to make new plans for the author. As a first step he was given the Chaplaincy. Robertson hastened to thank his benefactor: “Mr. Elliot has informed me of the great obligations I lie under to your Lordship on this occasion. . . .”\(^5\)

Robertson clearly understood that the new post was meant as much as a tender of intent as a reward for past merit. He received a letter from Lord Cathcart explaining Bute’s ideas at just about the same time as the commission for the Chaplaincy:

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\(^{9\text{a}}\) Blair to Bute, 16 August 1759, Bute MSS.

\(^{4}\) Cathcart to Bute, 20 June 1761, Bute Correspondence, Cardiff Central Library, MS 3.615.

\(^{8}\) Robertson to Bute, 1 August 1761, Bute MSS.

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Lord Bute told me the King's thoughts, as well as his own, with respect to your History of Scotland, and a wish his Majesty had expressed to see a History of England by your pen. His Lordship assured me every source of information which Government can command would be opened to you; and that great, laborious, and extensive as the work must be, he would take care your encouragement should be proportioned to it.

Cathcart expanded on this final theme. There could be no doubt, he added, that Bute's intentions for Robertson "were higher than any views which can open to you in Scotland." 6

In his reply to Cathcart's letter, Robertson said that he was no longer averse to writing a history of England. In 1759, he wrote,

I had not only very tempting offers from Booksellers, but very confident promises of publick encouragement, if I would undertake the History of England. But as Mr Hume, with whom, notwithstanding the contrariety of our sentiments both in religion & politicks, I live in great friendship, was then in the middle of the subject..., I determined that my interfering with him should not be any obstruction to the sale or success of his work.

But the situation was now "entirely changed," for Hume's work was virtually complete and it would be years before Robertson's history could appear. Robertson therefore concluded that "I can now justify my undertaking the English History to myself, to the world, & to Mr Hume." 7

Robertson was very definite, however, on certain conditions which he felt were necessary for his writing an English history under royal patronage. He had "above one-third" of Charles V completed, and he must finish it before starting a new topic; this would take "at least two years." Furthermore, he desired neither to change his residence from Edinburgh nor to drop his connection with the Scottish church. "As to the establishment to be made in my favour, it would ill become me to say any thing..." Yet it would be necessary for him to "consecrate" his "whole time and industry" to such a project, and the duties of his parish were very time consuming. The ideal arrangement, then, would permit him to retain an "ecclesiastical character" while devoting his energy entirely to his scholarship. 8

By the time Robertson and Cathcart again exchanged letters in

* Cathcart to Robertson, 20 July 1761, in Dugald Stewart, Account of the Life and Writings of William Robertson, 2nd ed. (London, 1802), p. 64.
* Robertson to [Cathcart], 27 July 1761, Bute MSS.
* Draft of Robertson to Cathcart, after 20 July 1761, in Stewart, Robertson, pp. 67-69.

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August, 1761, the historian was particularly concerned by Bute's desire that he should move permanently to London. As far as the work was concerned, "I am sure that I shall be able to compose here with more advantage than I could do in London." Besides, he wrote, "I have already some experience of writing a book the authority of which depends on manuscripts, & I know that in three or four months I am able to go as far in the consulting of them, as will cut out work which will require fifteen or eighteen months to finish." 8

When Bute persisted in wanting Robertson to move to London, perhaps because of a patron's natural desire for visible proof of his generosity, the author became more specific in listing his reasons for remaining in Edinburgh. In a letter to William Mure, Bute's political agent for Scotland, Robertson wrote that "at my time of life, accustomed to the manners of this part of the country, & living with ease & credit & in good company here, I am unwilling to think upon entering upon new habits, of abandoning my old friendships, & forming new connections." Nonetheless, he might still make the move were it not for the domestic difficulties involved: "You know how greatly the expense of house-keeping at London exceeds that at Edinburgh, and how much the charge of educating children increases. You know with what ease women of middling fortunes mingle with good company in Edinburgh; how impossible that is in London. . . . I happen to have three daughters." 10

Robertson had already talked to Mure before he wrote this letter, and Mure forwarded it to Bute with sympathetic comments of his own. In support of Robertson's wish to remain in Scotland, Mure pointed out particularly that he would require a smaller income there. Mure then went on to discuss the settlement that might be appropriate for the historian. Mure agreed with Robertson that he should be given some secure for life that would provide him with at least as much income as he would lose by resigning his church—preferably about £200 a year. This should be done as quickly as possible, since Robertson was determined to complete Charles V before beginning the history of England, and if he could be relieved of his parish the time required for finishing, by Robertson's own estimate, should be cut in half, from two years to twelve months. Also, he should be given a promise of an appointment as Principal of either the University of Edinburgh or the University of Glasgow at the first vacancy. Both incumbents were highly insecure:

8 Robertson to [Cathcart], 27 August 1761, Bute MSS.
9 Robertson to Mure, 25 November 1761, Bute MSS.

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one was ill, the other eighty. With an additional allowance to cover trips to London, this combination of Principalship and sinecuré should provide adequately for the historian.\footnote{Mure to Bute, 30 November 1761, Bute MSS.}

Robertson also was thinking in terms of a Principal’s chair. When Principal John Gowdie of Edinburgh fell seriously ill in February, 1762, the author hastened to open still another channel of communication with the wellsprings of patronage in London. He wrote Gilbert Elliot, a fellow member of the Select Society and one of Bute’s closest advisers. After tracing events from Cathcart’s letter of the previous July to Bute’s eventual, reluctant acquiescence to his remaining in Edinburgh, Robertson continued:

Nothing remains but to fix my appointments, about which I have no solici
tude, which the present hurry of business has put off for some time. An event is likely to happen which I imagine may facilitate the measure. Principal Gowdie who you know is near fourscore is taken so ill that his life is despaired of. As this is almost a sinecuré office, & at the same time a very decent one for a man who wishes to be considered only as a Man of Letters, with a Clerical character, you may be sure it would be very acceptable to me, & at the same time will have the advantage that the Salary of it will answer for so much of the appointment that was otherwise intended for me. I am not so avaricious as to wish it to be added to the others, it is the situation rather than any increase of Salary that is my object. . . . The office is in the gift of the Town-Council, but that you know alters the matter only one remove.\footnote{Robertson to Elliot, 15 February 1762, Minto Papers, National Library of Scotland.}

Robertson’s anxiety about Gowdie’s illness was such that he also sought intervention from Mure, who promised to write both Lord Cathcart and James Stuart Mackenzie, Bute’s brother.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}

When Gowdie died a few days later Robertson renewed his solici
tation to Elliot. He pleaded that since his application was publicly known “I should be glad to avoid the appearance of being neglected.” Despite the fact that the election was nominally in the hands of the Edinburgh Town Council, “I need not say to you that a letter from Lord Bute to Baron Mure or Lord Milton fixes the Election infallibly.”\footnote{Robertson to [Elliot], [February, 1762], Minto Papers.}

He need not have worried. As soon as Bute heard of Gowdie’s death he wrote Mure, instructing him to tell Robertson “that, from the minute
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I first fixed on him for our great undertaking, I determined to assist him in obtaining the Principal's chair either in Edinburgh or Glasgow; for that, being *ostium cum dignitate*, suited extremely my views. I have accordingly, by this post, acquainted Lord Milton with my wishes. While this would settle the election there remained the problem of completing Robertson's establishment. Bute thought a pension risky, since it would expire on the king's death. What did Mure suggest? Bute closed on a slightly anxious note: "Pray tell him to write me, and to explain the time he thinks he shall be at liberty to begin preparing materials." 16

"In consequence of the recommendation from above" 16 Robertson was duly elected over the previously favored candidate, Dr. Hugh Blair. Elated by his new position, Robertson felt that he had also discovered the answer for completing his establishment. The pitfalls of a pension could be avoided by appointment to an office for life, and what more suitable post could be found for him than Historiographer Royal for Scotland, an office which had lain dormant since the reign of Queen Anne. He suggested this to Bute, "but unluckily Lord Bute not being much acquainted with our Church imagined that my being named Principal would be followed of course by my resigning the office of Minister, & naturally concluded that there was no occasion for putting the finishing hand to my intended establishment because I was not yet ready to begin my new work, & had full leisure to apply to literary pursuits." 17

Robertson had, of course, implied to Elliot in his letter of February 15, that the Principalship would enable him to resign his parish. But now, having obtained that position, he pleaded at length for the appointment as Historiographer so that he could be rid of the burden of his church. He went so far as to argue that the added duties of the University position, a post he had previously described as "almost a sinecure," might seriously prolong the time needed to complete Charles V. Robertson asked Elliot to present his case to Lord Bute. As to the salary, "I pretend not to say," but it should be considered that the research for the history of England "will involve me in the expence of residing at London for five or six months every other year." It was to be hoped that the matter could be settled as soon as possible: "I need


17 Robertson to [Elliot], 7 August 1762, Minto Papers.

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not add that it is natural to wish that a matter which so nearly concerns both my reputation & interest should be put beyond the reach of accidents." 18

The ease with which Robertson had obtained both his Chaplaincy and the Principalship encouraged him to be still more demanding. When he again wrote Elliot less than three weeks after the letter cited above, he suppressed his sense of propriety enough to declare that £200 might be a reasonable salary to attach to the position of Historiographer. He would not feel "justified to the world" if he should resign his £139 stipend and not appear to have benefitted to some extent; this the £200 salary would accomplish. In other words, for Robertson to resign his church, so that he could complete Charles V and begin the history of England, his loss by this resignation should be more than covered by a new appointment. He ignored the fact that Bute had been given the impression that the revenue of the Principalship alone would be sufficient for the historian to quit his parish. Robertson did, however, admit that he was "sensible of the indelicacy of making terms in this way. But when I see Sam. Johnson . . . getting £300 a year, I am, perhaps, not too presumptuous in my demands." 19 But Sam Johnson, of course, had not asked for anything.

Bute, now Prime Minister and suffering from an increasing barrage of personal and political attacks, was in no hurry to grant Robertson's latest request. The Earl was probably disgusted by the historian's rapidly rising expectations, as well as by his failure to show any progress on the English history. But by the spring of the following year, when he was ready to give Robertson the Historiographer's post with the £200 salary, the author had decided that his former demands were insufficient. He pointed out that his present income was just short of £500, not including the free house which was attached to the Principalship. "I propose to resign my stipend," Robertson wrote, "and if I shall receive, in lieu of it, a salary of £200, an addition of £61 is made to my income. But in the pros[ecuting] my intended work I shall be obliged to reside four or five months in London every second year," and the expense of these journeys "exhausts nearly the whole additional salary." Furthermore, the pay of Edinburgh ministers might soon go up by some £30 a year, and "this makes a considerable alteration in the calculation." A salary of £250 now seemed more reasonable. Also, there would be considerable expense in purchasing books and having manu-

18 Ibid.

19 Robertson to [Elliot], 26 August 1762, Minto Papers.
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scripts copied. For this, Robertson concluded, "I should think four or five hundred pounds no extravagant sum." 50

Bute felt that his protégé was becoming too greedy. In May, 1763, he told Cathcart to ask Robertson bluntly whether he was willing to resign his church and become Historiographer Royal at a salary of £200. Robertson reluctantly accepted, probably because Bute's resignation as First Lord of the Treasury in April posed the threat that the Earl might also lose his control over patronage. Cathcart reported to Bute that Robertson hoped to resign his parish at the end of May and to complete Charles V within a year. 21

Robertson was in London for about ten days in July, and he used this opportunity to wait on Lord Bute at least twice to express "his gratitude to him for the repeated favours he has conferred on him," and probably also to inquire about the progress of his latest appointment. 22 These visits finally moved Bute to advise George III to sign the warrant for Robertson's new position. He was officially named Historiographer Royal in Scotland, with a salary of £200, on August 6, 1763.

Now that his "establishment" was completed, "Dr. Robertson's revenue . . . far exceeded what had been enjoyed by any presbyterian minister before him, and equalled at least the revenue of some of the bishops during the establishment of protestant episcopacy in Scotland." 23 He also achieved a certain fame as the first minister in Scotland to maintain a carriage. 24 This income was intended, of course, to give Robertson sufficient leisure to complete Charles V so that he could begin his English history as soon as possible. But Charles V took far longer than anyone could have anticipated. Robertson's duties as Principal proved much more time consuming than he had expected, and in 1763 he was elected to the additional post of Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Furthermore, Robertson's original estimate—that he would be able to finish the work in twelve months—was overly optimistic, probably because of a desire to placate Bute. In any case, Charles V was not published until 1769, at a time when Bute

50 Robertson to Bute, 9 April 1763, BM Add. MS. 38,200, ff. 295-7.
51 Cathcart to Bute, 28 May 1763, Bute Corresp. (Cardiff).
52 Robertson to Bute, Friday Evening [July, 1763]; 1 July [1763]. Bute Corresp. (Cardiff).
was trying to recover his health at continental spas and had long since lost any influence over George III.

Robertson did not forget his obligations to the unfortunate Earl. In March, 1765, he wrote Mure:

You know that when I was made His Majesty's Historiographer for Scotland, a proposal (which carried with it the force of a command) accompanied that grant. In consequence of it, I am under engagement, as soon as my present work is published, to attempt the History of England. This engagement I am bound by every tie to fulfill, and it will require the whole of my time and all my attention during the rest of my life. . . .²⁰

Notwithstanding this "engagement," Charles V led logically to the History of America and Robertson never began work on a history of England. Very possibly, even if he had wanted to write such a book, he would have found that royal patronage was no longer available to him. For, after his final break with Bute in 1765, George III's passionate attachment to the Scottish nobleman had changed to an intense dislike, both for the former favourite and for all his projects.

Despite Robertson's failure to write a history of England, he remained on good terms with Bute. When the Earl sent his son James in 1766 to be educated at the University of Edinburgh, the young man lived with Robertson's family.²¹ In 1769 the Principal gave Bute a copy of his Charles V, which was dedicated to George III, and eight years later he sent him the History of America.²² Finally, in 1791, he accompanied Bute's copy of his Historical Disquisition on India with a singularly apt testimonial: "This work," Robertson wrote, "will certainly be the last of my literary productions, & I flatter myself that Your Lordship will do me the justice to believe that I have never, for a moment, forgotten to whose patronage I owe that comfortable independance which has enabled me to carry on my studies so agreeably during the course of a long life."²³

That this "comfortable independance" did not lead to the intended history of England should not trouble modern readers. If such a work

²¹ James Stuart Mackenzie to Bute, 27 June 1766, Bute MSS.
²² Robertson to Bute, 23 October 1769, Bute Corresp. (Cardiff); Bute to Robertson, 2 June 1777, Robertson-Macdonald Papers, National Library of Scotland, MS. 3943, f. 15.
²³ Robertson to Bute, 23 May 1791, Bute MSS.
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had been written, it would today be unread. As a historian Robertson has not survived as well as Gibbon. His style now seems pompous, his viewpoint antiquated. The irony is that Robertson's greatest achievement is now recognized to be his enlightened leadership as Principal of the University of Edinburgh—a position Lord Bute obtained for him almost en passant, as a means to a never fulfilled and long forgotten goal.

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