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Reekiana

JOHN KAY'S SATIRES ON SIR LAWRENCE DUNDAS

IAIN GORDON BROWN

SIR LAWRENCE DUNDAS of Kerse, first Baronet (c. 1710–1781), is best remembered in Edinburgh as the man who used some of the proceeds of a life devoted to the service of Mammon to oust God from the east side of St Andrew Square. Dundas, Member of Parliament for the City from 1768, took for the site of his own house that which had been suggested for a church by James Craig in his plan for the First New Town.¹ The architect of Dundas House (1771) was William Chambers, and the model was the exquisite Thames-side villa of Marble Hill.² In 1794 the Excise Office took over the building; and in 1824–25, just before the Royal Bank of Scotland bought the mansion which still serves as its head office, a committee of the Faculty of Advocates had considered Dundas House as a possible new location for the Advocates' Library.³

The construction of such an opulent building on so prominent a site in the New Town was but one local example of the conspicuous use of riches on the part of Dundas. In London his residence was the palatial 19 Arlington Street, which was in part remodelled by Robert Adam, who also worked for Dundas at Moor Park, Hertfordshire, in the mid 1760s.⁴ Yet another Dundas country seat was Aske Hall, Yorkshire, bought in 1763. The Stirlingshire estate of Kerse had been acquired in the 1750s.⁵ A considerable landed proprietor, Dundas had also sat in Parliament briefly for Linlithgow Burghs (1747–48) and subsequently for Newcastle-under-Lyme (1762–68): his Edinburgh reign began in 1768 and lasted until 1780, when he lost the seat at an election the result of which he then successfully disputed. The social respectability of country- and town-houses and estates, and Parliamentary rep-

resentation, was confirmed after his death by the elevation of his son (who had married an earl's daughter) to the peerage as Baron Dundas of Aske: this Thomas Dundas's son in turn was created Earl of Zetland, and the late nineteenth century would see the further upgrading of the family to the rank of Marquess.⁶

But it was all built upon a foundation of corruption and speculation; and beyond Sir Lawrence Dundas's celebrity as owner of the finest house in Edinburgh was his infamy as an extremely dubious Government contractor. Such an occupation was indeed a recognised route to riches beyond the wildest imagining. When Robert Burns was searching for an outstanding symbol of the wealthy man, an indication of the very type of plutocracy, he fixed on that of the '[Indian] Nabob, or Government Contractor'.⁷ The suggestion has been made that it was Dundas whom John Ramsay of Ochtertyre had chiefly in mind when he alluded to the rapid acquisition during the Seven Years War of 'princely fortunes' on the part of certain individuals – men described by Ramsay as 'blazing stars, which eclipsed our first nobility'.⁸ The ill-gotten gain, hinted at by Ramsay's allusion to the speed and circumstances of war-time enrichment on a gargantuan scale, paid for subsequent legitimate, highly successful speculation in East India stock.

Interest in Dundas and his family grows. His political career has been examined in some detail. Public awareness of the splendid art collections of Sir Lawrence and his line, long known to specialists,⁹ has been fostered by the recent loan to the National Gallery of Scotland of superb portraits by Batoni and Zoffany, and a seminar has been devoted to the

patronage of a man called by Lord Shelburne 'the Nabob of the North'. Yet information on Dundas's life and activities is hard to come by outside the formidable volumes of *The History of Parliament*, and he has not even an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.¹⁰ All documentation, especially that of a memorably visual kind, is therefore to be welcomed, and to it due attention should be paid.

John Kay, the artist of so many delightful Edinburgh caricatures, executed two satires on Dundas. These constitute a verbal and visual supplement to the body of pamphlet literature relating to the disputed election, though they do not, in fact, appear to have been published at the relevant time, unless in some obscure pamphlet which is not now readily identifiable in any obvious collection. But the copperplates themselves were clearly engraved in the aftermath of the disputed election, or else must date from a time shortly following upon Dundas's death in September 1781: plates are made so that prints may be produced for circulation, distribution or sale – or they have no point. However, known prints appear to date from a very much later period. But if the election of 1780 or else Dundas's death a year later was the occasion for the original engraving, then the plates – so different from almost all the rest of Kay's large output of caricature portraits and figure studies which seems to have begun in 1784 – are to be reckoned Kay's earliest efforts at would-be reproductive printmaking for a popular market, and one in which he had not yet found his true niche as a rather gentle social satirist.

The mordant satire of the prints may be the explanation for their exclusion from the assemblage of plates scheduled for publication by Hugh Paton, and for the fact that one only (fig. 1) was eventually included in Paton's collection of Kay caricatures in 1837, where it appears very much as an afterthought, numbered but uncaptioned and not noted in the list of additional plates in the *Appendix* to the second

volume.¹¹ In his prospectus of 1836 Paton had stated his anxiety 'to avoid giving personal offence to the parties themselves, or their relatives';¹² and even fifty-five years after Dundas's death both of Kay's old squibs may have been seen as jibes to be suppressed. The second of Kay's satires (fig. 2) did not appear in collected form until as late as 1877, when it was included with its fellow in the A. & C. Black re-issue of Paton's two volumes.¹³

The Dundas prints take the form of rebuses, or hieroglyphic letters as Kay might have called them on the analogy of his later 'hieroglyphic' portrait of Napoleon, which is composed of emblematic or symbolic fragments. Hieroglyphs may be defined as objects standing for a word, or secret or enigmatic symbols. Kay's two rebuses are not really very taxing on the intellect of the reader, and not, perhaps, very subtle; but they are little known, and 'translations' may be welcomed.

The hieroglyphic letters represent what must have been a widely held if not very openly expressed view of Dundas at the time of his death, a view which focused not on any good qualities he may have had as financier and industrialist, nor on his fine taste in pictures, furniture and tapestries, nor yet upon the Grand Tour and ample allowance he gave his son so that he might rise in the world beyond his father's rank of baronet. James Boswell, who came to know Dundas well in the last year of his life, might think of him 'not as a cunning shrewd man of the world ... but as a comely, jovial Scotch gentleman of good address but not bright parts'; and Boswell further recorded his growing liking for Dundas with his 'kindliness' and 'simplicity'.¹⁴ 'I even felt for him as a man ungratefully used in his old age', Boswell noted,¹⁵ a reference, perhaps, to the reverse Dundas had suffered at the hands of the Edinburgh electorate in 1780 when William Miller, later Sir William Miller, Lord Glenlee, had unseated the old member, even though the wily Dundas later had this decision overturned on

petition in March 1781 and Dundas himself declared duly elected.¹⁶ This gerrymandering indeed caused – as Kay expresses it in the second satire discussed here – the whole town to be ‘set by the lugs’ on Dundas’s account. But despite Boswell’s charitable attitude to the old rogue, it was Dundas’s past as a corrupt Commissary General and Contractor to the Army which formed the view of his contemporaries; and it is to this that Kay makes biting reference in the hieroglyphic letters. Dundas had won lucrative contracts to supply the army in North Britain during the Duke of Cumberland’s campaign against the Jacobite rebels, and to maintain stores for troops engaged in the subsequent pacification of the Highlands. Similar commissions for supply and contracting services in Flanders were also obtained. Dundas’s so-called ‘German pillage’ followed, when he had the contract for the provision of bread and forage to the allied army in Germany during the Seven Years War. Kay’s allusion to a clerk being hanged in Dundas’s place seems to support Horace Walpole’s contention that the Commissary General

had been threatened with execution for the delayed fulfilment of a contract.¹⁷

The letters are generally self-explanatory. The reading of the fourth pictogram in the eighth line of the first epistle (?‘drinking’) is open to different interpretation, as is the final one in the sixth line of the second letter (?‘dogs’). Dundas might well have thought of the Merchant Company as ‘dogs’ on account of their opposition to his attempts to reverse the outcome of the 1780 election.¹⁸ The ‘Deacon of the Skinners’ is Adam Smith, who had voted for Miller and who had published a short pamphlet entitled *To the Public: From a Member of the Town-Council* (dated 5 October 1780 and signed) in justification of his conduct. Dundas would happily have sent him to the Devil for that. The reference to ‘their Millar [sic] in my Mill’ must allude to the (temporary) victory of young William Miller: ‘my Mill’, because Parliament and the Government service had long been Dundas’s personal cornchest, enabling him to leave an estate valued at £16,000 a year, and to accumulate a vast fortune estimated at some £900,000.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 2 John Gifford, Colin McWilliam and David Walker, *Edinburgh* (The Buildings of Scotland: Harmondsworth 1984), pp. 57, 325.
- 3 Iain Gordon Brown, *Building for Books: The Architectural Evolution of the Advocates’ Library* (Aberdeen 1989), pp. 113–114.
- 4 David King, *The Complete Works of Robert and James Adam* (Oxford 1991), pp. 307–308, 237.
- 5 On the Dundas houses see John Harris, ‘The Dundas Empire’, *Apollo*, LXXXVI (September 1967), pp. 170–179.
- 6 For family details see G[eorge] E[dward] C[okayne], *The Complete Baronetage*, 6 vols (London 1900–09), VI, p. 124.
- 7 *The Letters of Robert Burns*, edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2nd edn, edited by G. Ross Roy, 2 vols (Oxford 1985), II, p. 286.
- 8 Alexander Murdoch, *The People Above: Politics and Administration in Mid-Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh 1980), p. 127. See also Alexander Allardyce (ed.), *Scotland and Scotsmen of the Eighteenth Century from the Manuscripts of John Ramsay of Ochertyre*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1888), II, p. 247.
- 9 See the special number of *Apollo* (vol. LXXXVI, September 1967) devoted to aspects of the patronage of Sir Lawrence Dundas. See also *A Catalogue of the Magnificent Collection of Pictures of the late Sir Lawrence Dundas, Bart. which will be sold by auction, by Messrs. Greenwood, at their Room in Leicester Square, On Thursday, 29th May, 1794, and Two following Days* (London 1794), a copy of which is in the National Library of Scotland.
- 10 The fullest biographical treatment is the contribution by Edith, Lady Haden-Guest, to Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke (eds), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1754–1790* (London 1964), II (Members A–J), pp. 357–361.



Fig. 1. A letter to Sir Lawrence Dundas, composed and engraved by John Kay, with a 'translation'. (From Kay's Portraits, 1877 edition; National Library of Scotland.)































A/ letter = LETTER/ toe = TO/ SIR/ L[AWRENC]E/ Dund + ass = DUNDAS/

W + hen = WHEN/ eye = I/ CONSIDER/ w + hat = WHAT/ yew tree = YOU/ HAVE/ awl + ready = ALREADY/ DONE/ FOR/ MY/ bee + hoof = BEHOOF/, AND/ t + hat = THAT/ IT/ MAY/ NEVER/ AGAIN/ hap + quill = HAPPEN/ toe = TO/ bee = BE/ IN/ yew + r = YOUR/ WAY/ toe = TO/ ass + ist = ASSIST/ MY/ EMISSARYS/ AS/ bench + erly = FORMERLY/ eye = I/ drinking mug + not = CANNOT/ forb + ear = FOR-BEAR/ lamb + enting = LAMENTING/ yew + r = YOUR/ LATE/ mis + castle + tune = MISFORTUNE/, toe = TO/ re + jockey cap + itulate = RECAPITULATE/ awl = ALL/ yew + r = YOUR/ ser + vice + s = SERVICES/ WOULD/ bee = BE/ ENDLESS/. IN/ THE/ y + ear = YEAR/ castle + y + 6 = FORTY-SIX/ yew = YOU/ GRASPED/ t + hat = THAT/ OPPORTUNITY/ toe = TO/ GET/ coins = RICHES/ BY/ THE/ skull = DEATH/ OF/ thou + sand + s = THOUSANDS/ OF/ figure of Fame with trumpet + ilys = FAMILIES/. IN/ Ger + man + y = GERMANY/ w + hen = WHEN/ Commis + saw + ry = COMMISSARY/ toe = TO/ THE/ arm + y = ARMY/ yew = YOU/ SENT/ thou + sand + s = THOUSANDS/ toe = TO/ THE/ grave = GRAVE/ FOR/ w + ant = WANT/ OF/ loaf of bread = FOOD/. SINCE/ com + men + cing = COMMENCING/ Baro + net = BARONET/ yew = YOU/ HAVE/ bee + n = BEEN/ NO/ LESS/ ASSIDUOUS/ IN/ people + ing = PEOP-PLING/ MY/ king + dom = KINGDOM/ BY/ N + couraging = ENCOURAGING/ awl = ALL/ man + ner = MANNER/ OF/ WICKEDNESS/, BY/ GAMING/ man drinking = DRINKING/ FALSE/ swea + ring = SWEARING/ toe = TO/ SERVE/ yew + r = YOUR/ &/ MY/ ENDS/, FOR/ awl = ALL/ WHICH/ ser + vice + s = SERVICES/ yew = YOU/ MAY/ ASURE/ yew + rself = YOURSELF/ OF/ bee + ing = BEING/ MADE/ A/ pear = PEER/ OF/ MY/ king + dom = REALM/ AND/ MY/ priv + eye = PRIVY/ COUNSELLOR/ FOR/ EVER/.

eye = I/ AM/ yew + rs = YOURS/ &C/.

THE/ DEVIL/

An Answer to the 

The ex  ions in  r  are cold & ill  - Is this a 
 ent t  not serve  Have  not sent  the Dea
 con of the Sk-ners within these x days , is not the whole
 set by the  on my account? I so consign over
 the other Deacons for placing their  ar in my 
 and  assure  will take care of the Merchant 
 so as  cure them.  likewise forgot 1 esNTial ser  ren
 dered  in Ger  y w  had the address  get my
 Clerk  instead of myself. So t  think myself
 entitled  the Honours  have proposed

 am  rs for EVER



Fig. 2. An answer to the Devil, composed and engraved by John Kay, with a 'translation'. (From Kay's Portraits, 1877 edition; National Library of Scotland.)

AN/ ANSWER/ toe = TO/ THE/ DEVIL/

THE/ ex + press + ions = EXPRESSIONS/ IN/ yew tree + r = YOUR/ letter = LETTER/ ARE/ COLD/ &/
 ILL/ figure with scythe + ed = TIMED/. IS/ THIS/ A/ figure with scythe = TIME/ toe = TO/ lamb + ent =
 LAMENT/ t + tricorn = THAT/ eye = I/ drinking mug + not = CANNOT/ SERVE/ yew = YOU/. HAVE/ eye
 = I/ NOT/ SENT/ yew = YOU/ THE/ DEACON/ OF/ THE/ SK[IN]NERS/ WITHIN/ THESE/ X = TEN/
 DAYS/ shoemaker's last = LAST/, IS/ NOT/ THE/ WHOLE/ buildings = TOWN/ SET/ BY/ THE/ ears =
 LUGS/ ON/ MY/ ACCOUNT/? I/ awl + so = ALSO/ CONSIGN/ OVER/ toe = TO/ yew = YOU/ awl = ALL/
 THE/ OTHER/ DEACONS/ FOR/ PLACING/ THEIR/ mill + ar = MILLAR/ IN/ MY/ mill = MILL/ AND/
 eye = I/ ASURE/ yew = YOU/ t + tricorn = THAT/ eye = I/ WILL/ TAKE/ CARE/ OF/ THE/ MERCHANT/
 dogs = DOGS/ SO/ AS/ toe = TO/ C + cure = SECURE/ THEM/. yew = YOU/ LIKEWISE/ FORGOT/ 1 =
 ONE/ es + N + tial = ESSENTIAL/ ser + vice = SERVICE/ eye = I/ RENDERED/ yew = YOU/ IN/ Ger +
 man + y = GERMANY/ w + hen = WHEN/ eye = I/ HAD/ THE/ ADDRESS/ toe = TO/ GET/ MY/ CLERK/
 man on gibbet = HANGED/ INSTEAD/ OF/ MYSELF/. SO/ t + tricorn = THAT/ eye = I/ THINK/ MYSELF/
 well-head = WELL/ ENTITLED/ toe = TO/ awl = ALL/ THE/ HONOURS/ yew = YOU/ HAVE/ PRO-
 POSED/.

eye = I/ AM/ yew + rs = YOURS/ FOR/ EVER/

DUNDAS

- 11 *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings by the late John Kay ... with Biographical Sketches and Illustrative Anecdotes*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1837–38), II, supplementary plate 28.
- 12 [Hugh Paton], *A Descriptive Catalogue of Original Portraits, &c., Drawn and Etched by the late John Kay, Caricaturist, Edinburgh, Preparing for Publication with descriptive letter-press; containing a sketch of the Lives, Manners, and Oddities of the parties engraved, with Traditionary Anecdotes* (Edinburgh 1836).
- 13 *Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1877), II, plates 357 and 358.
- 14 *Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, edited by Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (The Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell, London and New York 1977), pp. 251–252, 254.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 16 *Kay's Original Portraits* (Edinburgh 1837–38), I, p. 119. The text is by James Paterson and James Maidment.
- 17 Quoted in [Denys Sutton], Editorial, 'The Nabob of the North', *Apollo*, LXXXVI (September 1967), p. 168.
- 18 Alexander Heron, *The Rise and Progress of the Company of Merchants of the City of Edinburgh 1681–1902* (Edinburgh 1903), p. 138.