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# ROBERT ADAM'S DRAWINGS: EDINBURGH'S LOSS, LONDON'S GAIN

IAIN GORDON BROWN

INTEREST IN THE LIFE AND WORK of Robert Adam (1728-92) and in his standing – both contemporary and posthumous – increases, a fact evidenced by the exhibitions, conferences and publications of 1992. On the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the birth of this most celebrated of Scottish architects, I published an article which dealt with the subject of Adam's reputation in the period immediately following his death in March 1792.<sup>1</sup> At the same commemorative moment A. A. Tait ably chronicled the sorry tale of the sale of the great collection of the architect's drawings. Through exploration of documentary evidence for the various Adam sales in the second, third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, Tait charted the story of the falling fortunes of the Adam family, and especially the declining reputation of its most celebrated member.<sup>2</sup>

The decline of Adam's reputation seems, in retrospect, almost as sudden as his end; and the most eloquent testimony to that decline is the saga of the drawings. A connoisseur such as Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo, who had the misfortune to turn directly from witnessing the funeral of Sir Joshua Reynolds to hearing the news of Adam's death ('The world has lost another Artist of great & original genius ... a very sudden & awful call indeed!'),<sup>3</sup> would have been astonished to know how soon it could seriously be suggested that the architect's original drawings and the engraved plates of his work would be regarded as either unsaleable or useful only as wrapping paper.

Tait followed his initial article with a discussion of a recently discovered additional Adam volume, known to have been part of the architect's own collection and disposed of at the 1818 sale, but which

had lain forgotten and separated from the rest of the vast Adam collection in Sir John Soane's Museum.<sup>4</sup> This find brought the subject of the fate of the Adam drawings as a whole to mind again; and research by myself on a wholly different subject subsequently revealed further information bearing upon the disposal of the drawings. This caused me to review all the evidence relating to the Adam sale; and, by piecing together a number of new discoveries and by taking full account of one particular source overlooked by Tait, and a few documents previously undervalued, I am now able to add some links more to the chain of knowledge of this unedifying tale. The present article, published to mark the bicentenary of his death, contributes further to our appreciation of the sadly fallen stature of Robert Adam in the eyes of his family, his architectural successors, the official patrons of art education in Scotland, and the British public at large.

A very brief summary of the history of the Adam collection between the death of Robert Adam and the year 1833, when the fate of the bulk of his drawings was finally settled, must be given here. William Adam, the last survivor of the Adam brothers, died in 1822. He had owned the architectural and other drawings left by Robert, and major sales of these had taken place in London in 1818 and 1821. His heir was his niece and housekeeper, Susanna Clerk, who had looked after him for many years. Together William and Miss Clerk had arranged the drawings into categories and mounted them in albums. Having failed to sell the remaining 9000 or so drawings and sketches to the British Museum, she brought them with her when she returned to Edinburgh to keep house for her bachelor brother John Clerk, Lord Eldin. To assist Miss Clerk's finances, Lord Eldin acquired a joint interest in the collection. He died in 1832.

In the letter-books of William Henry Playfair are three copy-letters of February 1833, the significance of which has not been appreciated by those interested in the story of the Adam collection. The first is to Playfair's friend C. R. Cockerell: <sup>5</sup>

The late John Clerk of Eldin, a remarkable character in Edinburgh, who became a judge a considerable time before his death under the title of my Lord Eldin, has left behind him a great collection of Drawings by Robert Adam the Architect to whom he was related. <sup>6</sup> These drawings consist of sketches of first ideas – working plans of various designs – & drawings of innumerable Chimney Pieces, Ceilings & ornaments of all sorts – many of which are coloured in the way that they were to be executed. There are 10 or 12 large thick folio volumes filled with these – and they are to be sold. [*As will be seen, the number was actually much greater.*] I know the persons interested in the result of the sale and I am going to trouble you with one or two questions respecting them.

Is there any person or persons, or Society or Institution, in London, likely to buy the whole collection – and, if so, would they be inclined to lay out a considerable sum, say 3, 4 or 500 pounds for such an object? supposing the drawings worth the money. Or, do you think they would bring their value at a public auction? And lastly do you think it would be right to sell them in London at the same time and same auction when Lord Eldin's pictures by old Masters will be sold? If you will answer these queries as soon as possible you will much oblige me. You see how entirely I rely upon your good nature ... Will you have the kindness to write as soon as you can?

Cockerell's reply was evidently not encouraging. Perhaps it was significant, after all, that even Playfair had felt it necessary in writing to a fellow practitioner to identify Adam as 'the architect'. Playfair accordingly wrote to one Mr Clerk, of Rose Court, Edinburgh. <sup>7</sup> His correspondent must be William Clerk, younger brother of the late Lord Eldin, heir to part at least of the judge's vast collections, and a nephew of Robert Adam. 'Mr Cockerell thinks', Playfair observed, 'that no one will be likely to offer a large price for Mr Adam's Drawings. And he does not know of any person or Institution that would wish to purchase them. But he thinks that London & the coming season would be the proper place & time to dispose of them. I regret that I have no more precise or satisfactory information to communicate.'

On the same day Playfair wrote also to a Miss Dalziel. <sup>8</sup> This was Mary, daughter of Professor Andrew Dalziel and Anne Drysdale, herself the daughter of Adam's sister Mary and Dr John Drysdale; Mary Dalziel was therefore a great-niece of Robert Adam. Playfair relayed Cockerell's opinion in these terms: 'He thinks in consequence of change of style in building & for other reasons that these drawings will not be much prized – and besides there is such a general depression in all things connected with the Arts at present that they will not bring a good price ... But he thinks London would be the best place to dispose of them, and if Lord Eldin's pictures were brought to the hammer there, that Mr Adam's Drawings should be sold at the same time.'

Playfair's investigations on behalf of his Edinburgh friends into potential private or institutional buyers followed upon the previous year's approach to a very likely purchaser who happened, in a sense, to come into both these categories: Sir John Soane. But this approach had been unsuccessful; and it had not been the first occasion that Soane had contemplated an acquisition that was, in the end, to become one of the greatest glories of his Museum. In December 1832, David Laing, the celebrated Edinburgh antiquary, bookseller and collector, had written to Soane on behalf of Lord Eldin's heirs, Susanna and William Clerk, and their law agents: <sup>9</sup>

I understand that some years ago you were desirous of purchasing the Collection of Architectural Drawings that belonged to the late Robert Adam Esq. The Trustees of the late Lord Eldin. & the other joint proprietors of these Drawings having come to the resolution of selling them, by private bargain, I have been requested by the Gentleman who acts on their behalf, to apply to you personally to ascertain whether you would be disposed to make any offer for the Collection. It forms an immense mass, comprising about Forty volumes in Atlas folio, chiefly half bound, at two different periods, filled with many hundred plans, elevations, etc. of public & private buildings – with drawings for Chimneys, Cielings [*sic*], Arabesque ornaments & other Architectural designs, either by Mr Adam himself, or drawn under his direction. The proprietors have not fixed the price of the Collection but I am informed that £400 was either formerly offered [*sic*] or expected, and they would wish if possible to

realize that sum. Should you therefore be still inclined to make the purchase, and wish for any further particulars, I will be happy to furnish them.

Soane's response to this unsolicited approach was curt: 'I saw the collection some years since and thought that the sum then asked for them was too large and I am of the same opinion as to the sum now stated by you to be required by the Proprietors.'<sup>10</sup> The evidence suggests that in all probability Soane was not aware of the full extent of the Adam collection by then on offer. Initially he assumed it either to be akin to the miscellaneous collection of picturesque and architectural drawings put up for sale in 1818 (when he had made selective purchases), or else to be that very assemblage of drawings in bound volumes which he appears to have inspected in London at that time, or perhaps in 1822 when Susanna Clerk offered the Adam collection to Joseph Planta, Principal Librarian of the British Museum.<sup>11</sup>

This approach to Soane having come to nought, and with Cockerell's opinion being that the Adam drawings should be included in the same sale as Lord Eldin's pictures and works of art, the Adam collection was indeed put up for auction in March 1833. The story of this celebrated sale – held, in fact, at Lord Eldin's house in Picardy Place, Edinburgh, and not in London, as Playfair had suggested would be the case – is well known, and need not concern us here.<sup>12</sup> The Adam drawings were listed in a special section of the catalogue, with a note to the effect that they were to be offered at the end of the ninth day's sale at an upset price of £250 'if not previously sold by private bargain'.<sup>13</sup> What has not before been realised is that, had an enterprising figure in the world of Scottish art and design got his way, the Adam drawings would have been secured for educational use in Scotland, and in the fulness of time would in all probability have come to form part of the collection of the National Gallery of Scotland.

Tait has observed that if the story of the sale of the

Adam drawings has a hero, that man was – and the suggestion is that this was by default – Sir John Soane. In fact the tale has another hero, albeit that his attempt to save the drawings for the nation was unsuccessful. James Skene of Rubislaw, *littérateur*, traveller and amateur artist, was, at the time of the Eldin sale, Secretary to the Board of Trustees for Manufactures in Scotland, an omnium gatherum body which had been set up after the Union to administer funds provided by the United Kingdom government for the encouragement of Scottish commerce and industry. This went under various sesquipedalian titles such as 'Board of Trustees for Fisheries, Manufactures and Improvements' or 'Board of Trustees for the Encouragement of Manufactures'; but it was generally known as the Board of Manufactures or, more simply, as the Board of Trustees. Its wide responsibilities had come to include the administration of a drawing school, the principal purpose of which was the training of designers for industry. To this 'Trustees' Academy' (as it came to be known soon after its foundation in 1760) we shall presently return. It is in the Minutes of the Board of Trustees that a new line on the saga of the Adam drawings is to be pursued.

On Tuesday 26 March 1833 the Board met in special session at its offices in the Royal Exchange. This meeting was on the eleventh day of the Eldin sale (so one calculates if Sundays are omitted). The Adam drawings had evidently not only failed to bring forth a private bid before the close of the ninth day, but had failed at auction to reach the upset price. Present at this meeting were the Lord President of the Court of Session (Charles Hope of Granton) in the Chair, the Lord Justice-Clerk (David Boyle of Shewalton), the Lord Advocate (Sir William Rae), Lord Meadowbank (Alexander Maconochie, whose father Allan, also Lord Meadowbank when raised to the bench, had been a friend of Robert Adam), Sir John Hope, Bt, Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, and Robert Graham of Redgorton. Skene's minute must be quoted in full:<sup>14</sup>

The Secretary stated that this Special Meeting of the Board had been called for the purpose of submitting to its consideration a Proposal for the Purchase of a valuable Collection of Architectural Drawings of the late Mr Adams, which is to be disposed of by public sale on Thursday next.

The Secretary stated that the Collection consisted of thirty volumes, comprising the entire Studies, Architectural Works and Drawings of that distinguished Artist, methodically arranged and presented in good order; that the Minimum Price proposed for the full set was £300, or £250, provided three volumes of miscellaneous drawings should be allowed to be withdrawn.

Connected with this subject the Secretary begs to remind the Board of its having upon a former occasion decided to make a similar purchase with a view to the advancement of the study of Architecture in this Country, and craves leave to read the Minute of the Meeting of the Board held on the 17th July 1830 authorising the Secretary to endeavour to purchase the Architectural Collections left by the late Sir Thomas Laurence [*sic*], but in which intention the Board was unfortunately disappointed.

The Board, after hearing the Secretary state the result of his enquiries among the principal Professional Men of Edinburgh as to the Merit of the Collection, and all tending to the same Opinion, namely that the Value of the Collection rested more upon its Merits historically, as containing so complete a series of the Studies and Conceptions of an Individual so eminent in Art, than as to any practical use the Collection could now be of, either to the Student, or as advancing the Knowledge of Art; that in a general Collection of Works of Art, and particularly in connection with Scotland, the Remains of the late Mr Adam's pencil and professional knowledge would constitute an interesting and valuable item; but that the Collection, in itself, did not contain much which could now be rendered available towards the advancement of the Objects of the Board.

The Board accordingly resolved, That it was not expedient to authorise the Purchase to be made.

Skene's displeasure at this decision was scarcely concealed in the letter he was obliged to send to James T. Gibson Craig, the lawyer acting for Lord Eldin's heirs: 'I had an opportunity at a meeting of the Board of Trustees yesterday to state the proposal as to the acquisition of the Drawings of the late Mr Adams, but I find that the board is not inclined to make the purchase, so that I shall not be a bidder as I had expected at the sale on Thursday.'<sup>15</sup> It seems clear from these circumstances, not previously understood, that a final attempt to auction the drawings was to be made at the end of the Eldin sale; though the number of volumes

mentioned by Skene does not accord with the total set out in the sale catalogue, and the matter of the withdrawal of three volumes of miscellaneous drawings cannot be explained unless, by some last-minute qualm of conscience, the family had decided to retain a token reminder of Uncle Robert's talents.

The Minute of the special meeting of the Board of Trustees had referred cryptically to the 'advancement of the Objects of the Board'. The abortive idea of the purchase of the Adam drawings occurred at a time when the Board had just been rethinking its aims and redirecting its efforts in the matter of art education in Scotland.

The Trustees' Academy had been established in 1760 with the object of training students in design for manufacture – in other words, industrial design. As a teaching institution it was therefore concerned not with fine art itself but with education in the applied arts: it trained artisans in, for example, carving, gilding, cabinet-making and, above all, in textile design, especially in pattern-making for carpets and damask table-linen manufacture.<sup>16</sup> But in the course of time, as Lindsay Errington has pointed out, these objectives had become obscured by the way that the Academy had developed. The fact that artists were employed as Masters, that methods for training industrial designers were actually no different from those for training artists, and that many young men who intended to be painters rather than designers for manufactures attended the Academy in the absence of any other suitable school of art, meant that by the early nineteenth century the original purpose of the Academy had been altered. In 1798 the Academy began to acquire plaster casts of classical sculpture, and this cast collection grew in size and importance until it culminated in the acquisition of the Albacini Collection in 1838.<sup>17</sup> By the 1830s large sums in relation to the total funds available to the Academy for all purposes had already been laid out on purchases of casts which, in accordance with contemporary

academic theory, were seen as essential for the teaching of drawing. When the Adam collection came on the market, therefore, the Board clearly felt that its resources would be better spent in increasing the size and quality of its plaster-cast collection rather than in the purchase of the graphic relics of a once-famous architect who had been dead for more than forty years.

In the Minute of 26 March 1833 Skene had referred to the occasion when the Board of Trustees had attempted to purchase the 'Architectural Collections' of Sir Thomas Lawrence. This opportunity to acquire for the Academy what at a first reading appears to be a collection of architectural drawings, but which was actually an assemblage of casts of architectural mouldings, is referred to in the Trustees' Minutes of 1830. The episode is an instructive contrast with the contemplated purchase of the Adam drawings. If the Trustees had failed to acquire the Lawrence casts, that was not because they had considered the acquisition inappropriate to the aims and needs of the Academy, as now they did in the case of the Adam material. But there is perhaps an interesting parallel in the way that Adam's drawings were rejected for purchase by a government-financed body as a valuable acquisition for the public good, and the fate of Lawrence's own collection of old master drawings, which was dispersed as the result of a negligent government's inaction.<sup>18</sup>

On 17 July 1830 it had been minuted that the Board had received notification from the architect Thomas Hamilton (who had, in turn, been informed by T. L. Donaldson) that 'a very valuable and complete collection of casts of the most celebrated works of ancient architecture' from Lawrence's collection was to come on the market, affording 'an opportunity of adding an important branch to the gallery of casts belonging to the Board in a state of perfection which is not likely again to occur'. The Royal Academy in London, it was said, was reluctant

to purchase all these casts for the sum of £200, and the Board had determined to seize the chance to make a purchase which it saw as one 'for the benefit of the students of architecture in Scotland'.<sup>19</sup> The material from the Lawrence collection, though of an architectural nature, accorded with the Board's current policy of expanding its cast collection in a way that the two-dimensional character of the Adam drawings clearly did not, though the latter collection was of far wider scope, and of enormous importance in the history of both architecture and design.

It was the need to purchase the casts used in the teaching of drawing, and the past, current and expected future outlay on material of that kind, which in part accounts for the Trustees' unwillingness to spend their resources on the Adam drawings for which they clearly saw no immediate practical value as teaching aids. In this decision there was a double irony.

First was the fact that the decision not to purchase the Adam collection came at the end of a period of intense old-master picture buying by the Royal Institution, using the £500 annuity it had from the Board of Trustees.<sup>20</sup> Andrew Wilson, the painter and dealer most responsible for these purchases, had written to Skene from Genoa on Christmas Day 1829: 'The acquiring of pictures is the first thing I would recommend to the Board of Trustees as the most useful way of extending the benefits of an Academy because there is no resource of the kind in Scotland to which the Student's attention can be directed. It is a mere matter of chance now if he acquires anything like true taste before his judgment is perverted by the trash current.'<sup>21</sup> It was to complement the Trustees' cast gallery that the directors of the Royal Institution had used their grant from the Board to establish a picture collection the purpose of which was to be didactic. As Wilson put it in 1831, the collection was designed to be of 'the genuine works of the great masters

which are more especially of an instructive character to artists, than such as are usually selected with a view to the adornment of a gallery as a public spectacle, — pictures to be relied upon as safe models upon which the student may advantageously form his taste and correct his practice, although these may prove attractive to the cursory observer, or be less calculated to dazzle by the brilliancy of subject and effect'.<sup>22</sup>

Words such as these could well have been applied to the merits of the Adam collection, and to the scholarly advantages afforded by the acquisition of the drawings but two years later. With its avowed interest in the teaching of design, and these recommendations that it should secure the best models for students to 'form [their] taste and correct [their] practice', it is the more surprising that the Board of Trustees did not place a greater value on the volumes. Here was a vast treasury — a paper museum — not only of architectural drawings proper, but also of innumerable designs for furniture, carpets, and ornaments of all kinds — didactic material so suitable for the type of reference collection advocated by Wilson, as distinct from the type of material suitable if public display had been the prime consideration, and arguably of such potential value in a school which aimed first and foremost to train practical designers.

The second irony was one which becomes apparent only when we consider Robert Adam's links with the Trustees' Academy. Our knowledge of this connection, revealed in the records of the Board of Manufactures, serves to increase the sense of puzzlement that material which so clearly reflects the broadest aims of the Academy in the light of its historical development was regarded as of no more than merely antiquarian curiosity and of insignificant practical value.

The Board Minutes for 13 March 1767 record the death of the Academy's first Master, William Delacour, and the fact that consequently 'the drawing school was broke up'.<sup>23</sup> In these circumstances it was

resolved that 'Mr Adam of London should be wrote to, desiring him to endeavour to help this Country to a Master skillful in design in general and the drawing of Patterns for the Manufactures in particular.' The text of the letter which the Earl of Findlater and Seafield and George Clerk (later Sir George Clerk of Penicuik, fourth baronet, and an uncle of the future Lord Eldin), acting on behalf of the Board, sent to Robert and James Adam is preserved in the Trustees' letter-books.<sup>24</sup> The object of the Board's drawing school, at its broadest, was defined as the improvement 'of the taste of the young Manufacturers in the country'; but it was admitted that the importance of the institution actually extended beyond the utilitarian to become 'a part of polite education', an academy to which 'other Scholars of the first Fashion & of both Sexes' might attach themselves, for the Principal of the University of Edinburgh (William Robertson, the Adam brothers' own cousin) was said to be anxious to consider the Trustees Academy as 'an appendix to the University, and to promote it as much as he can'. For the late Delacour there was no obvious successor in Edinburgh. He had, the Adams were told, 'understood Ornament and Landscape pretty well', though he was 'defective in Architecture, in designing the human figure and animals. If possible we would wish all those Branches united ...' Opportunities in Edinburgh, offered by the broadening scope of the Academy with its dual functions as applied design school and polite drawing class, would be 'no bad Encouragement for a good [man] in Cypriani's [*sic*] style'.

It was in the hope that Robert and James Adam would be able to find a new drawing master that they were approached by the Board, 'being perfectly acquainted with [their] zeal for promoting Taste among people of all Ranks ... We make no apology for giving you this trouble. We know your Characters too well to doubt your taking it with pleasure. It will at the same time oblige the Trust-



Adam's involvement with the learned institutions of Edinburgh and with the encouragement of design is illustrated by this title-page ornament used in the first few volumes of the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* from 1788. Adam's drawing, engraved by John Beugo, shows a muse or personification of learning in the setting of the Scottish capital. (*National Library of Scotland*.)

ees and everybody of Taste in this Country.' In the event it was not the Adam brothers who were able to recommend a suitable Master for the Edinburgh school, but rather another *émigré* Scot, Allan Ramsay, who engaged Charles Pavillon for the Board of Manufactures in 1768.<sup>25</sup> Ramsay had also been approached by the Trustees, who had evidently seen fit to seek the help of fellow countrymen (Robert Strange, too, was mentioned at this time of need), each of them deemed to be at the very crown of his respective branch of the arts which he practised with such distinction in London.

When, on the death of Alexander Runciman, Master between 1772 and 1785, the future direction

and even the survival of the Trustees' Academy seemed in doubt, Robert Adam's assistance and advice was once again sought. The question facing the Board was 'how far the Academy may be rendered of such utility to the ornamental manufactures and house works as that it should be continued'. The opportunity was taken to ask the opinion of those who had 'particular occasion to know something of the state of the manufactures and works, with which drawing is connected', and Adam was the first approached of the six 'different Gentlemen of professional skill, knowledge and taste, in whose opinion the Board might have confidence ... with a view to the improvement of the manufactures &ca. which admit



of being figured, ornamented and decorated'.<sup>26</sup> The Board's letter to Adam stated the underlying wish to 'promote and diffuse the Art of Drawing', and begged his opinion as to whether 'an elegant taste in Ornament and Design' might be as effectually promoted by the type of art school that had developed, with a master and regular tuition, or by any alternative arrangement involving premiums for drawings of different patterns.<sup>27</sup>

Robert Arbuthnot, the Secretary to the Trustees, observed in his report – and this was echoed in the Regulations of the Academy set down about the same time – that the success of young students of design and ornamental drawing for the 'Manufactures, Carpenter & house works' depended upon the advice of good teachers, the provision of only the best models, and the demonstration of whatever was 'incongruous or in a depraved taste'.<sup>28</sup> The list of those approached at this time includes, after Adam's, the names of John Stirling, the cotton and linen printer; Dr John Roebuck, sometime iron-master of Carron Company; another linen printer and a carpet manufacturer; and John McGowan, the Edinburgh connoisseur. It is interesting to be reminded by this list of Adam's close connection with industrial design and the products of the Carron iron works. His involvement in 'the Mechanic Arts' and his knowledge of 'the ornamental Manufactures, or the decorations of Houses, or of furniture'<sup>29</sup> were recognised by the Trustees of the mid-1780s, even as appreciation of that aspect of his career, and the graphic records of that proficiency and a lifetime's involvement, was forgotten or discounted by the Trustees of the early 1830s.

Adam and the others questioned had offered the opinion that the continuance of the Academy was certainly 'of utility to the different Ornamental Manufactures and House Works ... because an elegant taste remains yet to be introduced into the Country in many of the manufactures &ca, and because persons capable of designing and drawing Patterns for

the different branches are not to be had'.<sup>30</sup> In the next decade, however, the systematic purchase of plaster casts after the antique began, and it is clear from the records of the Board of Trustees that drawing from these casts was considered the only necessary training for potential students of applied design or, for that matter, for any other students attending the Trustees' Academy. Such casts obtained in Italy were of value for copying by 'those carrying on the Ornamental Manufactures & House Works & for the inspection and study of Artizans'.<sup>31</sup>

By 1832, the year before the final and greatest Adam sale, the Trustees (as has been noted) considered the state of their Academy, and tried to assess where it was going and the rightness of that path. It was accepted that the early purpose – service to the 'useful arts in which drawing and tasteful designs are requisite' – had long been combined with the more general furtherance of polite art education, and that the school had become one for 'painters, sculptors and engravers'. But stress was laid on the importance of maintaining the original aim of instruction for artisans.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, in view of this somewhat half-hearted commitment to one worthy purpose, the Board felt that the Adam collection now on the market was too élitist, or too rarified an assemblage of drawings the wide-ranging subject-matter of which was not fully appreciated, and in so doing the Trustees overlooked the fact that the collection contained so much from which students in many branches of the arts might draw inspiration. With hindsight, it is surely possible to apply to the value of the Adam drawings the remark made in 1836 in justification of the projected expenditure on a set of casts of the Elgin Marbles for Edinburgh: the question of cost was to be deemed 'a *bagatelle* compared with the importance of the acquisition'.<sup>33</sup>

And so, the Board of Trustees having failed to offer for the Adam drawings, and the collection having failed to reach its reserve during or at the end

of the Eldin sale, the stage was almost set for Sir John Soane to enter for the final act of the drama. A most interesting series of letters survives in the Soane Museum which details these final stages in the saga. On 13 June 1833 the Edinburgh lawyers Gibson Craig, Wardlaw and Dalziel wrote to Soane:<sup>34</sup>

Miss Clerk of Eldin informs us that you, at one time, wished to possess the Collection of Architectural Drawings which was formed by the late Robert Adam Esq. You probably are aware that that Collection was lately exposed at an upset price of £250, at the Eldin sale of Pictures here, & from there being no bidding on that sum it was withdrawn. Since that time we have had an offer of Two hundred pounds for the lot, but as Mr Adam's representatives are desirous that the Collection should, if possible, not be separated but placed entire in some public library or Museum such as you are forming, they would willingly, as circumstances render it necessary that they should be parted with, dispose of them to you for the above mentioned sum of £200.

In observing the commendable desire of the vendors that the integrity of the collection be preserved, and that furthermore the desirability of public access had been recognised, we should note that a subsequent letter from the law agents (2 July 1833) enlarges on the fate that had been avoided: 'A bookseller offered £200 a few weeks ago for the lot, who we believed intended to break up & disperse the collection for profit'.

Soane first asked about the relationship of this collection to the Adam material he had seen years previously, and requested details of the number and size of the volumes and an estimate of the shelf space they might occupy. Were he to be satisfied on all these points, he promised an immediate decision (28 June 1833). On 2 July the Edinburgh lawyers sent him a list of the volumes and their contents. There were fifty volumes in all, which would occupy 'a space in a library of about ten feet in length by 26 inches in height [*sic*]'. The collection was described as follows:

I. Series of XXIV Volumes large oblong half bound folio containing views, plans, elevations, sections, &ca of public and private buildings in London & in various parts of England & Scotland.

II. Series of XIV Volumes (atlas folio) consisting of several thousand Architectural designs and ornaments, classed according to their subject as follows:

- Monuments, Temples, Towers and Garden seats 1 vol.
- Ceilings & sections 4 vols
- Ceilings 1 vol.
- Arabesque drawings 1 vol.
- Glasses and girandoles 1 vol.
- Tables, terms, tripods, sofas, stools, chairs, &ca 1 vol.
- Chimneys 3 vols
- Pianofortes, clocks, watchcases &ca 1 vol.
- Sketches of ceilings, friezes, mouldings, iron work, &ca 1 vol.

III. Another series of XII volumes folio of Mr Adam's architectural studies while in Rome.

Soane's mind was made up. 'I entertain so high a regard for the memory of Mr Robert Adam', he wrote on 8 July, 'that I should much regret the dispersion of such a collection of his Works and as in the events [*sic*] of my becoming possessed of these Volumes they will be permanently secured with the rest of my Library & Collection for the use and advantage of Students in Architecture and the Artists of Great Britain in general'.<sup>35</sup> Edinburgh's loss was London's gain.

Soane was prepared to seize the opportunity which the Board of Manufactures had let slip; and his vision of public responsibility and the permanence of a collection open to those interested is all the more commendable. Soane it was, after all, who could refer to his 'late friend' Adam in terms of reverence, and who did not shrink from defending, 'in candour and justice to departed merit', his memory against those detractors who would 'wrest from that great Artist his well-earned fame'.<sup>36</sup> Addressing the students of the Royal Academy in his eleventh lecture on Architecture, Soane had pointed specifically to the link between the genius of Robert Adam and the notion of applied design for manufacture: 'It may be added that when the higher excellencies of Art are felt by an enlightened Public, Taste and Elegance will become generally diffused. The light and elegant Ornaments, the varied compartments in the Ceilings of Mr Adam,

imitated from the Ancient Works in the Baths and Villas of the Romans, were soon applied in designs for Chairs, Tables, Carpets, and in every other species of Furniture. To Mr Adam's taste in the Ornaments of his Buildings, and Furniture, we stand indebted, in-as-much as Manufacturers of every kind felt, as it were, the electric power of this Revolution in Art. Our printed Linens and Paper Hangings exhibited such specimens of Decoration, that the admirers of the Loggia of the Vatican could not see, without rendering due praise to them.<sup>37</sup>

Soane's decision was said to 'gratify the repre-

sentatives of Mr Robert Adam very much' (11 July). The volumes – as Tait showed, these were now actually fifty-four in number, for Gibson Craig, Wardlaw and Dalziel had been working from an old description when they set out the details of the collection for the prospective purchaser – were dispatched by steamer from Leith on 20 July, insured for the full value of £200. On 24 July Soane wrote to acknowledge receipt of the cargo at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and to say that Robert Adam's drawings were 'deposited safely amongst my collection from which they will never be separated'.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am especially grateful to Ian Gow of the National Monuments Record of Scotland, who first found a reference to the Adam sale of 1833 in the records of the Board of Trustees for Manufactures, and who suggested places I might look for other, earlier references to Robert Adam in the Trustees' Minutes and letter-books. When I proposed that he and I should pool our knowledge of the documentary sources to write an article on the lines of the present one, he declined saying that I would do it better alone, and that it was 'much grander to be acknowledged'. Though I doubt the truth of his first statement, I am very happy to do what I can in formally acknowledging my indebtedness to Ian Gow's recollection of an obscure reference spotted when he was looking for something else. For assistance of various kinds I am grateful to Susan Palmer, Archivist of Sir John Soane's Museum, and Margaret Richardson, Assistant Curator; and to Dr Lindsay Errington of the National Gallery of Scotland. Professor Alan Tait gave his blessing to my reopening the file on the affair of the Adam sale.

- 1 I. G. Brown, "'The Resemblance of a Great Genius": Commemorative Portraits of Robert Adam', *Burlington Magazine*, 120 (July 1978), pp. 444-451.
- 2 A. A. Tait, 'The Sale of Robert Adam's Drawings', *Burlington Magazine* 120 (July 1978), pp. 451-454. See also Tait's introductory section on 'The Blair Adam Drawings' in *Robert Adam at Home*, the catalogue of an exhibition at West Register House, Edinburgh, in 1978; and the Appendix in A. T. Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, 2 vols (London 1922), II, pp. 354-355.
- 3 National Library of Scotland, Acc. 4796, Box 46, File 4, Sir William to Lady Forbes, 5 March 1792.
- 4 A. A. Tait, 'An Adam Volume in Sir John Soane's Museum', *Burlington Magazine*, 129 (November 1987), p. 743.

- 5 Edinburgh University Library (EUL), Playfair letter-books, Vol. 4, pp. 386-387, 1 February 1833.
- 6 John Clerk, Lord Eldin (1757-1832) was the eldest son of John Clerk of Eldin (1728-1812), himself an exact contemporary of Robert Adam whose sister Susannah he married. The Clerk and Adam families, linked initially by the architectural connection of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, second baronet (1676-1755) and William Adam (1689-1748), and subsequently united by marriage, remained close in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.
- 7 EUL, Playfair letter-books, Vol. 4, p. 400, 9 February 1833.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Sir John Soane's Museum, London, Spiers box-file ('Papers connected with Purchases'), Laing to Soane, 12 December 1832.
- 10 *Ibid.*, Soane to Laing, 15 December 1832.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Soane to the Edinburgh legal partnership of Gibson Craig, Wardlaw and Dalziel, 28 June 1833.
- 12 Frits Lugt, *Répertoire des Catalogues de Ventes Publiques*, Vol II (The Hague 1953), No. 13236; *Catalogue of the Extensive Genuine, and Highly Valuable Collection ... late the Property of the Hon. John Clerk of Eldin, one of the Senators of the College of Justice* (Edinburgh 1833). The auctioneers were Messrs Thomas Winstanley & Sons of Liverpool. On the events of the sale see I. G. Brown, *The Clerks of Penicuik: Portraits of Taste and Talent* (Edinburgh 1987), p. 23; and *idem*, *The Hobby Horsical Antiquary* (Edinburgh 1980), p. 18.
- 13 Eldin Catalogue, p. 75.
- 14 Scottish Record Office (SRO), West Register House, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/36, pp. 308-309.
- 15 SRO, Trustees' letter-book NG 1/3/24, p. 463, 27 March 1832.
- 16 For a good, concise account of the Trustees' Academy, see

- David and Francina Irwin, *Scottish Painters at Home and Abroad, 1700-1900* (London 1975), pp. 90-94. See also Hugh Brigstocke, 'The Georgian Heritage', in Colin Thompson (ed.), *Pictures for Scotland. The National Gallery of Scotland and its Collection: a Study of the Changing Attitudes to Painting since the 1820s* (Edinburgh 1972), pp. 8, 18; and Lindsay Errington, *Master Class: Robert Scott Lauder and his Pupils* (Edinburgh 1983), pp. 9-10.
- 17 On the acquisition of casts for the Trustees' Academy see Glenys Davies (ed.), *Plaster and Marble* (The Edinburgh Albacini Colloquium), published as *Journal of the History of Collections*, 3, no. 2 (1991), *passim*, but especially Helen E. Smailes, 'A History of the Statue Gallery at the Trustees Academy in Edinburgh and the Acquisition of the Albacini Casts in 1838', pp. 125-143.
- 18 On the fate of the Lawrence collection see Douglas Goldring, *Regency Portrait Painter: The Life of Sir Thomas Lawrence*, *PRA* (London 1951), pp. 337-339.
- 19 SRO, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/36, pp. 85-86.
- 20 Hugh Brigstocke's contributions 'The Royal Institution' and 'The Purchase of Old Masters', in Thompson (ed.), *Pictures for Scotland* (note 16), pp. 26-32.
- 21 SRO, Royal Institution Minute Book NG 3/1/1, pp. 292-293 (whole letter pp. 289-294). This is quoted slightly inaccurately by Brigstocke, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
- 22 Quoted by Brigstocke, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- 23 SRO, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/18, p. 192. Recently published secondary sources on the history of the Trustees' Academy give the date of Delacour's succession by Charles Pavillon as 1765; but the Trustees' Minutes, and a manuscript 'History of the Edinburgh School of Design (Trustees' Academy)' by Alexander Christie, Master in 1845, clearly give the date of Delacour's death as 1767, and of Pavillon's succession as 1768. This MS. history, which is in the library of the National Monuments Record of Scotland (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland), probably dates from 1844-45.
- 24 SRO, Trustees' letter-book NG 1/3/10, pp. 94-96, 17 April 1767.
- 25 SRO, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/25, p. 109.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 27 SRO, Trustees' letter-book NG 1/3/14, pp. 296-297, Arbuthnot to Robert Adam, 28 December 1785.
- 28 See SRO, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/25, where Arbuthnot's report is transcribed, pp. 108-113. See also Christie's MS. 'History' (note 23), pp. 5-12, 18.
- 29 Quotations from Christie's MS. 'History'. pp. 22 and 19.
- 30 SRO, Trustees' Minutes NG 1/1/25, p. 112.
- 31 Christie's MS. 'History', p. 34.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 33 SRO, NG 2/3/1/16, William Turner to the Directors of the Royal Institution.
- 34 This and subsequent quotations (other than those cited in notes 35-37 below) are taken from papers in the Spiers box-file ('Papers connected with Purchases') in the Soane Museum (note 9).
- 35 This letter is quoted by Bolton, *Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, II, p. 355, though the Edinburgh law firm is incorrectly named.
- 36 Sir John Soane, *Lectures on Architecture as deliverd to the Students of the Royal Academy from 1809 to 1836 in Two Courses of Six Lectures each*, edited by Arthur T. Bolton (London 1929), pp. 149, 172.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 180.