

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



Zella Ashford, 'The Connoisseurs' Identified?',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series 2 (1992), pp. 15–21.

~~~~~

This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club**, **The Journal for  
Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC), including contents of  
previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

**This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.**

For any further uses of BOEC material, please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old  
Edinburgh Club, at [editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk](mailto:editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk). The Club has a Take-Down Policy  
covering potential rights infringements. Please see [http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-  
take-down-policy](http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy).



*Digitised by the Centre for Research  
Collections, Edinburgh University  
Library from the copy in the Library  
Collection*



## 'THE CONNOISSEURS' IDENTIFIED?

ZELLA ASHFORD

IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF SCOTLAND there hangs David Allan's much admired picture of 'The Connoisseurs'. This is regarded as one of his best paintings. The colours are soft and pleasing and the grouping is well balanced. For long it has been the subject of interested discussion and speculation about the three figures depicted. In group portraits, Allan habitually placed small unobtrusive numbers beside the various sitters on the face of the painting and added a key to these numbers on the back of the picture.

However, in the case of 'The Connoisseurs', subsequent relining had obscured the inscriptions and the identities Allan had attached to the subjects of the painting had become lost.

In August 1986 the picture was examined by the Conservation Department of the National Galleries of Scotland. In Infra-red Vidicon the old inscription again became visible, together with Allan's signature and the date 1783. The identities of the sitters as now revealed are (1) John Caw, (2) John Bonar, (3) James Bruce



Fig. 1. The Connoisseurs, by David Allan, 1783. (National Gallery of Scotland.)

and, in the picture on the wall, (4) Dr Thomas Caw. By coincidence, research on John Caw of the Excise has recently revealed something of the story behind the picture.

John Caw of the Excise was a member of a large clan of that name in Perthshire who all seem to be interconnected. John appears to have come from Crieff. He was nephew and nearest of kin to a Thomas Caw, brewer in Crieff, who died in 1777 and in his will left John the debt of £41.11.8 still owing to him in a debenture dated 19 October 1721, 'obtained by the deceased Thomas Caw and the Severall other Claimants therein on account of the losses sustained by them by the Burning and destruction of their houses and goods by the Rebels in Scotland during the time of their late rebellion' (i.e. 28 January 1716).<sup>1</sup> This debt is listed by Reid in *The Annals of Auchterarder*, who notes that it was eventually paid off in 1781 after Mr Haldane of Gleneagles, one of the claimants, had deducted the expenses of three journeys to London and the cost of appeals and fees charged by counsel and agents.<sup>2</sup>

In 1749, when John Caw would be about 24, he appears as assistant to the Accountant General of Excise in Edinburgh, at a salary of £30 per annum. He went on to become Assistant Correspondent and Keeper of the Register of Lawyers' Opinions from 1771 to 1779, at a salary of £100 per annum, and then Deputy Secretary from 1781 to 1784, in which year he died.<sup>3</sup>

Though living in Edinburgh, John Caw kept up close links with his family and friends in Perthshire, and particularly with another John Caw, a cousin of roughly the same age, a merchant in Perth. Through this connection he had met John Bonar (1722-1761), minister of the West Church in Perth, who died of a fever in December 1761 leaving a family of eight – six boys and two girls all under 14 – and a widow, Christian Currier, aged 38. In 1760 the Bank of Scotland had called in a bond for £1500, which John

Bonar had backed to help an uncle in business in Edinburgh and this resulted in his widow being left with no means of support. It is said that her 'all' of pecuniary substance amounted to only 35 shillings when she left Perth.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter written to his cousin in Perth, dated 18 February 1762, John Caw of the Excise wrote as follows:

I have struggled for several weeks past with bad health, have been confined once again, I thank God I am now better and hope to be abroad in a few days ... I have at last wrote Poor Mrs Bonar. The accts I have of the Situation of the Affairs of that Family distress me greatly, how the Good Woman is to bring up that dear family of Children in the Circumstances she is left does not appear, I have been Casting about twenty different ways how something might be done, in my Principal Aim have met with a disappointment ... I have heard that your Town have had it under consideration to do something for the Widow and Fatherless, I am afraid to ask if it is so, or rather if all hope is Over.<sup>5</sup>

The outcome of this concern was that John Bonar (1747-1807), the eldest boy, came to live with John Caw in July 1762 while he took classes at Edinburgh University. His intention was to follow his father into the ministry. However, part-time work was found for him in the Excise Office, where he showed such ability that he eventually went on to become First Solicitor of Excise in Scotland and an authority of some repute on questions of Revenue.

When John Bonar arrived in John Caw's household he found young Thomas Caw already established. This was the son of David Caw, a brother of John Caw, who had emigrated to South Carolina, become a 'Practitioner in Physick' and also acquired a plantation, Goosekirk. David Caw died in 1758, leaving instructions in his will that Thomas (1748-1772) was to be sent back to Scotland to the guardianship of his uncle until he reached the age of 21, and that from the age of 14 he should be brought up to the study of 'Law or Physick or some other Genteel Profession'.<sup>6</sup> This explains the number of Arts courses Thomas took before beginning the study of medicine in 1766. He qualified in 1769 with a thesis *De Haemoptoe*.<sup>7</sup>



John Bonar kept a journal between 1762 and 1764, and often referred to his remaining at home to care for either John Caw, whom he regarded with great respect as his 'Benefactor for Good', or Thomas Caw. In May 1764 Bonar noted that 'Mr Caw has taken another House at the Head of the West Bow. Tho' only three Rooms yet tis more commodious than this one.' Here Bonar proceeded to partition off a 'closet' where he could study, and in November of that year he noted that 'Mr Porteus of Whitburn sleeps here – but now very lucky I have my Closet to retire to from the Bustle of the rest'.<sup>8</sup>

While a student at Edinburgh University John Bonar, together with William Creech, founded the Speculative Society. Bonar was its enthusiastic Secretary from November 1764 until November 1771, when he received a unanimous vote of thanks. He read

his last essay in 1774. Thomas Caw also became a member; he joined at the second meeting of the Society and read several papers.<sup>9</sup>

After qualifying, Dr Thomas Caw practised for a time in this country and then, in August 1770, married his cousin Mary Caw, daughter of John Caw of Perth, and returned to South Carolina. His health, never good, failed again, and this comment is from a letter between two of the Bonar brothers, written about 8 October 1772:

Our old acquaintance Mr Thos Caw died last week, he had been in bad health for some time and was ordered by his physicians abroad to come to this country to see what good the change of air would do him – he landed at London, but was able to come no further and died a few days after his landing – Mr Caw (who is in very great distraction on account of this sudden stroke) and Mr Caw from Perth set out yesterday morning for London – his young wife is to be pitted.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier, in April 1772, John Caw had bought a fifth-floor flat in a tenement which had just been built 'upon a piece of ground called the Society'.<sup>11</sup> This is shown in Edgar's 1742 plan of Edinburgh, just to the east of Candlemaker Row, near Bristo Port. In 1770 the land had been acquired for building houses by William Maconachie, wright in Edinburgh, from John Cleghorn, sometime brewer in Edinburgh; the ground had formerly belonged to the Society of Brewers. Perhaps John Caw had intended this flat for his ill-fated nephew Thomas Caw, for he never lived in it himself.

Mitchell's List of Members of the Scottish Excise includes the following notes:

5 July 1773, to John Caw, Secretary's Desk. An allowance, the board having been obliged to occupy his dwelling house for 13 weeks in consequence of the insufficiency of the late Excise Office in the Cowgate. £31.10/-.

10 October 1773, to Jean Sandby John Caw's Servant. An allowance for her extraordinary trouble during the time her master's house was occupied by the honble board. £2.2/-.<sup>12</sup>

If John Caw was still living in the house at the head of the West Bow, it would have been quite conveniently near the Excise Office, which at that time

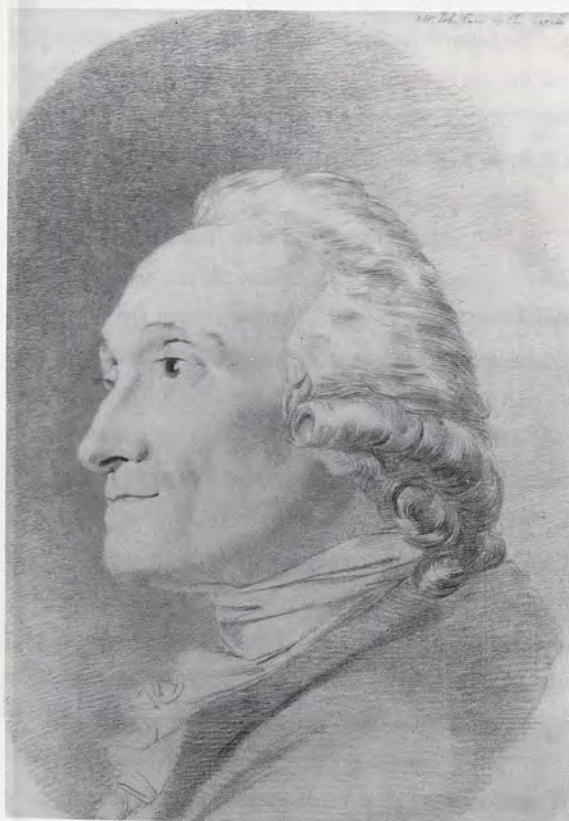


Fig. 2. John Caw of the Excise, by John Brown, c. 1783. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery*.)

was situated near the head of the Cowgate to the east of the Magdalen Chapel. Equally the Excise may have commandeered his flat in the Society.

*Williamson's Directory* for 1773-74 gives both John Caw and John Bonar as living in Chessels Court, whither the Excise Office had also moved.<sup>13</sup> It appears from evidence given at the trial of Deacon Brodie that a house separate from the Excise Office was maintained in Chessels Court for a member of staff who was responsible for the keys.<sup>14</sup> By 1775 John Bonar had moved out, possibly on his marriage to Janet Palmer, but John Caw continued to live there at least till 1781.

In 1780 John Caw was invited to become one of the original founding members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. In a report which appears in the *Memoirs of the Life of William Smellie* it is stated that 'about 30 of the portraits of the early members of the Antiquarian Society were drawn in black lead at the Expense of the Earl of Buchan by the late celebrated John Brown, who was particularly excellent in that stile of drawing'.<sup>15</sup> Among them was John Caw of the Excise. It is obvious from the list of subjects John Caw donated to the Society in 1782 that he must have been a keen collector of antiquities all his life, and that he had been in contact with many of the eminent men of his time (see *Appendix*).

John Caw died on 15 September 1784, aged 59, and was buried on 18 September in the Henderson burial place in the Canongate Kirkyard. The cause of death was given as 'decay'. What link there was with the Henderson family has not been discovered, but in the Canongate Register appears a notice of one William Henderson, buried 12 May 1771 in his own burial place, aged 80 years. He died of a fever and was described as 'Late Treasurer of this Burgh'.<sup>16</sup> Henderson's tombstone can still be seen, but there is no mention of John Caw on it.

It transpired that, in the July before he died, John Caw had made a deposition and settlement on James Bruce, Accomptant of Excise, of his 'real and personal

estate and particularly that dwelling house being the fifth storey of that Tenement built upon the piece of ground called the Society'.<sup>17</sup> The mother of James Bruce (1753-1826) was Isobel Caw, daughter of David Caw, merchant in Crieff. Bruce must therefore have been another nephew or cousin of John Caw. James lived in the Society until around 1796, and became Accountant-General of Excise before he retired at the age of 70.

The picture therefore shows us John Caw with the two young men he had so materially assisted in making their way in the world. John Caw, Deputy Secretary of the Excise, aged 58 in 1783, sits on the left. In his hand is a copy of a painting of 'St John the Baptist in a Landscape' (drawn in reverse, because it is made for an engraving).<sup>18</sup> John Bonar, aged 35, Deputy Solicitor of the Excise, stands behind him. Dr Thomas Caw, the much loved nephew who had died in 1772, is shown in the picture on the wall. But who is James Bruce, sitting on the right with his sporting dog waiting patiently beside him? A moment's reflection shows he cannot be the heir, who would have been only 30 at this time.

Is he, perhaps, James Bruce of Kinnaird (1730-1794), aged 53, the intrepid traveller known as Abyssinian Bruce? At this time Bruce was the talk of the town because of his recent return from London, where his traveller's tales had brought him into much ridicule. According to Crouther Gordon, David Allan and James Bruce were friends. Indeed this was the period when David Allan was painting panels on bookcases in the room which had been built on to Kinnaird House to contain the collection of books, manuscripts and other curiosities which Bruce had accumulated during his travels.<sup>19</sup> Of course, this identification is far from certain, but it is offered after comparison with other known portraits of Abyssinian Bruce. In some the facial resemblance to the figure in 'The Connoisseurs' seems more than a passing one. James Boswell described Bruce as a 'tall stout bluff man in green and gold'.<sup>20</sup> Descriptions of Bruce agree



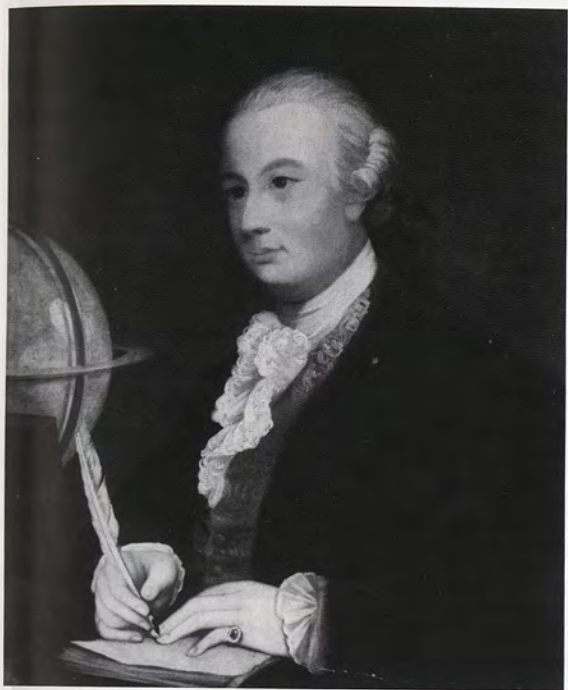


Fig. 3. James Bruce of Kinnaird, unknown artist, c. 1765. (National Portrait Gallery, London.)

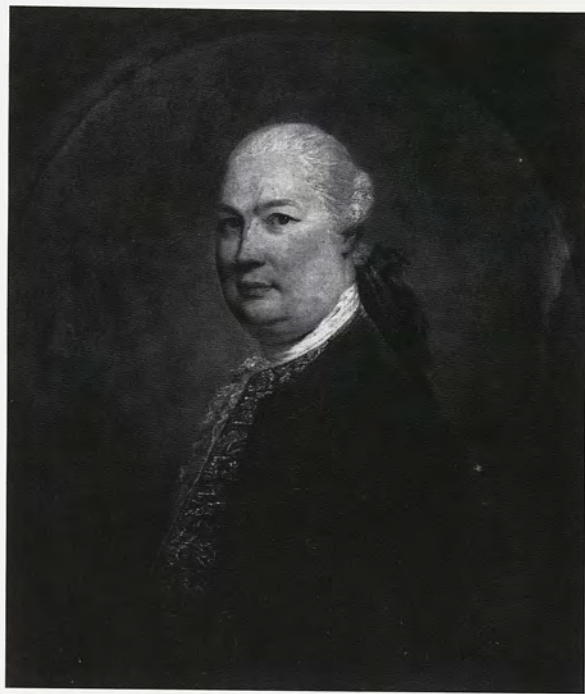


Fig. 4. James Bruce of Kinnaird, by David Martin, c. 1772. (In the collection of the Earl of Elgin.)

that he was a big man, 6 foot 2 inches in height, and one of the main objections to the suggestion is that the figure of Bruce does not appear large enough in comparison with the others in the painting.<sup>21</sup>

The furniture in the picture is shown in great detail, and is clearly contemporary. The press is very similar to those made by Francis and William Brodie at that time, and it is interesting to see it with the bust on the plinth in the centre of the broken pediment, a feature which is often missing from pieces that have survived to the present day.<sup>22</sup> It has been suggested that the silver box on the table may be a pounce-box for dusting writing paper, but there are no other writing materials, and the paper beneath Bruce's hand is a printed journal. Snuff boxes were sometimes as tall as this one appears to be, about 3 inches; they were usually double-sided for different snuffs and 'decoration if any was generally confined to an emblazoned coat of arms, or

an elegantly engraved monogram'.<sup>23</sup> As the portfolio is propped up behind John Caw's chair, he has (we might surmise) taken out the engraving to ask James Bruce how this compares with landscapes through which he has travelled, or to discuss the attribution of the original painting, which is in doubt, though it is possibly of the school of Raphael.

In 1780 David Allan wrote to Lord Buchan: 'I would bend towards the small Domestic and conversational style as it tends most to improvement and the most useful as it is the means of everlastingly joining friends together on the canvace'.<sup>24</sup> He has surely done this here. Allan was also rather put out at John Brown being given the commission to draw the heads of the original members of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and is perhaps making the point that he is just as good an artist, and can paint in colour as well as draw in black lead.<sup>25</sup>

## APPENDIX

*List of the collection deposited with the Society of Antiquaries by John Caw, April 1782*

The following list is taken from William Smellie, *Account of the Institution and Progress of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1782), pt 1, pp. 96-97.

A warrant under the Privy Signet of Mary Queen of Scots, permitting David Blair of Adamtoun, on account of his corpulency and other complaints, to absent himself from the Queen's host, dated at Dunfermline the 15th of June 1562.

A letter signed by the above Queen to the Laird of Adamtoun, requiring his attendance at Hamilton, with his friends and followers, for her Majesty's service, dated at Hamilton the 6th of May 1568.

Seven silver Scots coins, *viz*:

One of Francis and Mary, Sovereigns of France and Scotland;

One of Queen Mary, *Oppidum Edinburgi*;

One of King James VI, similar to the last;

Two forty pence coins of King Charles I;

Two five shillings pieces of King William, dated 1697.

Three English silver coins:

A penny of King Edward I;

A rose sixpence of Queen Elisabeth;

A fourpence piece of King Charles II, dated 1673.

Five old silver pennies of the Count of Namur and Henault.

An old silver coin of the Dutchy of Guelders.

Sixty-six copper coins and medals, *viz*:

Twenty of King James V of Scotland, struck in Villa de Edinburgh;

Nine bodles of King James VI, Charles I and II, and William and Mary;

Six Scots pennies of King Charles II;

An English farthing of King Charles II, dated November 1672;

An Irish shilling of King James II, dated November 1689;

An Irish coin, on one side, *Floreat Rex*, on the other, *Quiescat Plebs*;

A larger and smaller coin of the settlement of Bombay;

A penny of the Isle of Man, struck by order of the Duke of Athole;

A farthing of Nicholas Shepherd, in Saxmundham, Draper;

A large Russian coin, dated 1764;

A coin of Charles VI, Emperor of Germany, and King of Spain, dated 1712;

A coin of the Electorate of Bavaria, dated 1750;

A coin of the Stadt Hamm, dated 1725;

Two medals of Utrecht, one dated 1620, the other struck in 1607;

A medal, on one side a fortified town on the sea coast, inscription, *in adversis virtus*, 1603; on the other, a cock in a tree and a fox below, inscription, *aliud in lingua, aliud in pectore*;

A medal of Holland, dated 1595;

Another of Guelders, dated 1594;

A coin of Philip IV, dated 1652;

Another Spanish coin of Charles II, King of Spain, dated 1686;

A Swedish coin;

A two skilling Danish coin, dated 1680;

Two large Portugal coins, the dates 1720 and 1743;

Two smaller ones of mixed white metal and rude sculpture, dated 1769;

A small coin of the Canton of Berne, dated 1718;

And six other coins.

He likewise presented a curious and valuable collection of ores of copper, lead and iron, corals, chrystals, figured stones, petrified shells, etc., consisting of 39 articles.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Scottish Record Office (SRO), Edinburgh Commissariat, CC 8/24/1.
- 2 Alexander George Reid, *The Annals of Auchterarder* (Crieff 1899), pp. 165, 170.
- 3 SRO, West Register House, J. F. Mitchell, 'List of Members of the Scottish Excise Department, 1707-1830', RH 4/6/1.2.
- 4 SRO, Bonar Papers, GD 194, box 5.
- 5 Private papers, in the possession of descendants of the family.
- 6 South Carolina Probate Court, Charleston County; Wills, etc., 1757-1760, p. 159G.
- 7 *List of Graduates of Medicine, University of Edinburgh, 1705-1845* (Edinburgh 1846), p. 163.
- 8 Private papers, 'A Journal, 1762-1764', 2 vols, II, p. 33.
- 9 *History of the Speculative Society, 1764-1845* (Edinburgh 1845), pp. 73, 75.
- 10 SRO, Bonar Papers, GD 194, box 5.
- 11 SRO, Edinburgh Burgh Records, B 22/8/46.
- 12 See note 3.
- 13 *Williamson's Directory for the City of Edinburgh from May 1773 to May 1774* (facsimile reprint, Edinburgh 1889). The names of Caw and Bonar both appear in the *Appendix* containing names missing from the original issue of this, the first *Edinburgh Directory*.
- 14 William Creech, one of the Jurors, *The Trial of William Brodie and George Smith, 27-28 August 1788*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh 1788), pp. 43, 44.
- 15 Edinburgh University Library (EUL), Laing MSS. La. IV. 26; Robert Kerr (ed.), *Memoirs of the Life, Writings & Correspondence of William Smellie, FRS & FAS*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1811), II, pp. 84, 85.
- 16 New Register House, Canongate Register, 685<sup>3</sup>/23.
- 17 SRO, RS 27/283/85.
- 18 See Luitpold Dussler, *Raphael: A Critical Catalogue* (London 1971), p. 48, pl. 100; the original painting, in the Accademia, Florence, was often reproduced in engravings. Karl Karoly (*Raphael's Madonnas and other Great Pictures*, London & New York, 1893, pp. 34-35) comments that in this picture St John is represented at the age of 12 or 15 years. He is naked except for the skin of a wild animal on his thigh. He is seated under rocks on the margin of a fountain, and he points with his right hand to a cross formed of two reeds and fastened to a tree. Homan Potterton (*Guide to the National Gallery, London, Edinburgh 1976*, p. 113) records that Allan used the device of a reversed drawing in an earlier picture, 'A young English Traveller in Rome in 1775', where Raphael's 'Madonna della Sedia' is shown in the same manner.
- 19 T. Crouther Gordon, *David Allan, the Scottish Hogarth* (Alva 1951), pp. 19, 53. See also 'Parish of Larbert, Stirlingshire', *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Vol. VIII (Edinburgh 1845), p. 351.
- 20 William K. Wimsatt and Frederick A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell for the Defence, 1769-1774* (London 1960), p. 272.
- 21 This might, however, have arisen if Allan drew the figures separately before 'joining them on the canvace' (see below). Further evidence of Bruce's size is provided in the clothing that is still preserved at Broomhall. A letter from David Allan to Sir James Grant written from Edinburgh, 13 June 1785, throws further light on Allan's methods of painting (SRO, Seafield Muniments, GD 248, box 511, bundle 2). 'I flatter myself to make an agreeable group of three figures, Mr Duff, Lady Anne & Lady Grant & has enclosed my present Idea of the composition & begs your remarks on it if approved off I wd get some persons of their stature to sit by an organ which will be my next step to study nature. Mr D. has a wig pray let me know what colour or powdered or whether it should be his own Light Brown hair tyed & particularly the colour of Eyebrows & eyes of both him & Lady Anne Duff - we must suppose them all many years younger & at the time Mr D. lived - I think it would make a pretty picture.' Alexander Duff, 3rd of Hatton, b. 26 March 1718 (the Mr D. of the letter) died November 1764 after the amputation of his leg on 29 October; he was Sir James Grant's father-in-law (*Burke's Landed Gentry*, 1937, p. 654, Duff of Meldrum & Hatton).
- 22 Francis Bamford, *A Dictionary of Edinburgh Wrights and Furniture Makers, 1660-1840* (Furniture History Society 1983), pls 26, 27.
- 23 A. Kenneth Snowman, *Eighteenth Century Gold Boxes of Europe* (London 1966), p. 93.
- 24 EUL, Laing MSS. La. IV. 26.
- 25 NLS, MS. 3592, f. 146. In a letter from David Allan to Thomas Graham dated 6 November 1785 he wrote: 'I have a Notion of Lord Buchan Laying a New Plan for a proper Drawing School at Edinburgh but he has got an attachment to Mr Brown who can only draw a head in black lead'.