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THE BURNS–SCOTT MEETING AT SCIENNES HILL HOUSE

DAVID PURDIE



Fig. 1. Engraving of 'Burns's first Meeting with Scott', in the drawing room of Sciennes Hill House, Edinburgh, by Heliog DuJardin, after the painting by C. M. Hardie. (Courtesy of National Museums of Scotland: [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk).)

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS illustrations of the life of Robert Burns is the painting by Charles Martin Hardie RSA of 1893 which depicts the one and only meeting between Scotland's greatest poet and young Walter Scott, later to be her greatest novelist (fig. 1). The encounter took place in early 1787 at Sciennes Hill House near Hope Park (now the Meadows), the Edinburgh home of Professor Adam Ferguson (1723–1816).<sup>1</sup> Charles Hardie (1858–1916) came originally from East Lothian, and had studied art at the Trustees Academy in Edinburgh.<sup>2</sup> The picture was probably executed at his studio, a purpose-built house on Bell's Brae at the west end of the capital's New Town overlooking the gorge — 'dene' in Scots — through which the Water of Leith tumbles past Dean Village.

A Freemason, Hardie was a successor to Burns as a Laureate of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning in Edinburgh's Old Town, a title previously conferred on James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd. Whether this influenced his desire to portray the poet's life in Edinburgh is not known, but he was probably moved by a letter of Scott's cited in John Gibson Lockhart's 1828 biography of Burns.<sup>3</sup> Lockhart was married to Sophia Scott, the much loved elder daughter of Sir Walter from whom Lockhart obtained his recollection of that famous meeting in Ferguson's drawing room more than thirty years previously. Three decades might have passed but it is clear that nothing had dimmed the memory in Scott's mind. The text of his reply describes the poet's behaviour, dress and appearance, especially his remarkably

large, black, luminous eyes which, said Scott, ‘glowed, (I say literally glowed) when he spoke with feeling or interest. I never saw such another eye in a human head, though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time.’<sup>4</sup>

The original painting, now at Abbotsford, shows the moment of contact. Scott, then an apprentice in his father’s law office, is being nudged forward by his lifelong friend Adam Ferguson Junior. What had happened was that Burns had been greatly moved by a print of a painting by Henry Bunbury (1750–1811) of a soldier lying dead beside his weeping wife and child, below which were some lines of poetry. None of the literati present could answer Burns’s query as to the author — until the shy sixteen year old lame boy told the bard that the lines were by John Langhorne (1735–1779):<sup>5</sup>

Cold on Canadian hills or Minden’s plain,  
Perhaps that parent mourned her soldier slain;  
Bent o’er her babe, her eye dissolved in dew,  
The big drops mingling with the milk he drew,  
Gave the sad presage of his future years,  
The child of misery, baptized in tears.

Also present at Ferguson’s Sunday gathering were some of the greatest stars of the Edinburgh Enlightenment. They included Adam Smith, whose *Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* is the sourcebook of modern economics; Joseph Black, physician and chemist, whose great discovery was the gas carbon dioxide, so relevant to the atmosphere of today; and James Hutton, whose book *The Theory of the Earth* was, as it were, the bedrock of modern geology. Ferguson himself was the author of *On the Nature of Civil Society* and is regarded to this day as the founder of the discipline of sociology. However a recent intriguing discovery in the archives of the National Gallery of Scotland suggests that yet another celebrated character may have been present.

The Gallery contains a small unpublished watercolour depicting the façade of Sciennes Hill House (fig. 2). Attached to the painting, whose artist is unknown, is a hitherto unpublished letter. This is in the hand of Colonel James Ferguson, another son of Professor Ferguson, and is clearly meant to accompany the watercolour, which Colonel James was presenting to the collector W. F. Watson, who



Fig. 2. Watercolour of Sciennes Hill House, Edinburgh, unknown artist and date. (Courtesy of National Galleries of Scotland, D2590.)

was later to donate it to the National Gallery. Ferguson wrote from 6 Dundas Street, Edinburgh, on 23 June 1855:<sup>6</sup>

This Drawing faithfully represents my Father — the late Prof. Adam Ferguson’s — House at the Sheens where Scott, then a youth of 15 years of age, met Robert Burns. It was in the apartment of which the 2 windows [are] seen in the gable, that Dugald Stewart introduced the Scottish poet — and my brother Adam believed that Dr Black, Dr Hutton and John Home the Poet were of the Party. I well remember Lunardi the aeronaut (whom I thought the grandest man of them all) promising to take me up in his balloon with him.

The print itself by Bunbury of the ‘Dead Soldier in the Snow’ which gave rise to the incident ... described by Sir Walter is now I believe in the possession of Mr Robert Chambers, to whom it was presented by my eldest brother, the Knight.

The mention of Lunardi is most intriguing. Vincenzo Lunardi (1759–1806) came to Britain as Secretary to the Ambassador of the Duchy of Naples. In the autumn of 1784 he made the first flight in a



Fig. 3. Engraving by John Kay: Vincenzo Lunardi, with Union Flag, standing in the gondola of his hydrogen-filled balloon before ascent from Heriot's Hospital grounds, 5 October 1785. (Courtesy of Museum of Flight, National Museums of Scotland: [www.scran.ac.uk](http://www.scran.ac.uk).)

hydrogen balloon in England when he ascended from Moorfields in London (accompanied by his dog and cat), landing near Ware in Hertfordshire. The following year he came north to Scotland and made ascents from Milton of Campsie and from Glasgow, causing tremendous popular excitement. In October 1785 a large Edinburgh crowd watched Lunardi's balloon rise from the grounds of George Heriot's Hospital and proceed over thirty miles to the north-east across the Firth of Forth (fig. 3). He landed in fields near Ceres in Fife to the utter astonishment of the local farm workers who, quite reasonably, mistook him for the archangel Gabriel.<sup>7</sup> He published a description of his balloon flights in 1786, in which he was careful to describe himself as the first traveller in the *English* atmosphere, in deference to James Tytler, an Edinburgh man who had made a limited balloon flight in the summer of 1784.<sup>8</sup> Tragedy struck Lunardi, however, in August 1786 at Newcastle upon Tyne when a young man, Ralph Heron, became caught up in one of the guy ropes

of the rapidly ascending balloon and fell to his death. Heron was thus the first fatal casualty of air travel in Britain.

Burns does not mention a meeting with Lunardi in his works or correspondence, though he did mention balloon flight ('things they ca' balloons') in his *Epistle* to the Ochiltree schoolmaster William Simpson in May 1785. In Scotland, a bulbous lady's bonnet with a broad flange named after his balloon became highly fashionable. One such was being worn by the unknown young lady sitting one Sunday in front of Burns in the Kirk of Mauchline, unaware that a common head louse was marching proudly across it. This was too good for the witty poet to miss:

I wad na been surpris'd to spy  
 You on an auld wife's flainen toy;  
 Or aiblins some bit duddie boy,  
 On's wylecoat;  
 But Miss's fine Lunardi! Fye!  
 How daur ye do't ?

James Ferguson (1777–1859), like many young Scots of his day — and like all his brothers — was destined for a military career, in his case in India. He arrived in Calcutta as a young Lieutenant in 1798 and was appointed to the 3rd Bengal Native Infantry. By 1809 he was a Captain, resident in Delhi and serving as Commander of the Escort to the Governor-General, the 1st Marquess of Hastings. In 1824, by this time a Lieutenant Colonel, he retired from the army and returned to Scotland.<sup>9</sup>

It must be conceded that his letter does not state with certainty that Lunardi was present at the specific occasion of the meeting of Burns and Scott. Neither does it say that the ten year old James was himself present, but relies on his older brother Adam's account, recalled by James when well on in his seventies. The mention of Lunardi might be read as a personal recollection of a similar meeting rather than a clear linking to the same gathering. Hardie's painting, an imaginative reconstruction of the famous meeting, contains a number of unidentified people. That one of them might have been Italy's — and Scotland's — first successful aviator, simply adds to a painting which still has the power to inspire. It reminds us of the heady days when the city which had ascended to become the intellectual epicentre of Europe was not Athens, or Rome, or London — but Auld Reekie herself.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The house still survives, in Sciennes House Place, though much altered and incorporated into a block of flats.
- 2 Prestonkirk, in F. H. Groome (ed.), *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* (London 1896).
- 3 J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh 1828), pp. 159–163.
- 4 J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scot, Bart.*, 7 vols (Edinburgh 1837), I, pp. 166–167.
- 5 John Langhorne, *The Country Justice* (London 1774), part 1.
- 6 National Galleries of Scotland, D2590.
- 7 John Kay, *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1837), I, p. 80.
- 8 Vincent Lunardi, *An Account of five Aerial Voyages in Scotland* (London 1786; reprinted Edinburgh 1976).
- 9 India Office Library, London, Service Army List for Bengal East India Lists, Ferguson, Lt. Col. J., L/MIL/10/20–674.