

The Duel between  
Sir Alexander Boswell  
and James Stuart



# The Duel between Sir Alexander Boswell and James Stuart:

*Scottish Squibs and Pistols  
at Dawn*

By

Michael Moss

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# CHAPTER 1

## IT IS VERY PAINFUL TO REMEMBER THESE THINGS

Alexander Boswell is easily identified as the son and heir of James Boswell, Samuel Johnson's friend and biographer, and he is usually dismissed as a reactionary Tory. Little is made of James Stuart of Dunearn, except that he was a Whig lawyer in Edinburgh and that he caned Duncan Stevenson, the printer of *The Beacon* newspaper, in Parliament Square in 1821 for printing unacknowledged libels against him.

In his *Memorials of His Time*, Henry Cockburn reflected on the events that led up to the duel between Sir Alexander Boswell and James Stuart of Dunearn in March 1822 in which Boswell was killed:

It is very painful to remember these things. . . . No one can have lived and acted in Edinburgh in my day without finding much in its public characters and transactions to be loved and admired, a great deal to be overlooked, and something to be unsparingly condemned. My error is in being too gentle with the last.

Nevertheless, he had no doubt that the duel and its aftermath marked a turning point in Scottish political life, bringing to an end 'the political cannibalism by which our comfort had been torn'.<sup>1</sup> Although his account was biased by his Whig opinions, particularly his criticism of Sir Walter Scott for encouraging the Tory young blades, his analysis contained much truth which subsequent historians have simply repeated without delving into the lives of the participants.

I first became aware of these events obliquely through an interest in the whisky industry and the Stevenson family, who founded Oban as a resort and its still functioning distillery. Later writing the history of Standard Life, the Edinburgh Life Assurance Company, I came across references to the financial plight of the Boswell family after Sir Alexander's death. In writing the entries for James Stuart and Duncan Stevenson for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, I became increasingly intrigued. There

were gaps in the story and Cockburn's Whig perspective seemed, perhaps deliberately, to disguise more than it revealed.

The discovery of James Stuart's carefully preserved correspondence about his various disputes with the Earl of Morton suggested that he was not quite the innocent character that had been portrayed. Reading through Sir Alexander's surviving correspondence in the Beinecke Library at Yale University revealed a complex and uncertain personality who at times had more in keeping with James Stuart than either would have cared to admit. They shared a common descent from Sir George Bruce, the early Scottish industrialist and progenitor of the Earls of Elgin, and were closely related to the aristocracy. Their lives, which led, perhaps inexorably, to the fatal encounter, shed a great deal of light on Scotland of the Enlightenment, but from a wholly different perspective. Neither would have claimed to be a great thinker, but they both thought of themselves as part of the intelligentsia and they wrote and published. Their politics at times aspired to higher ideals looking forward to the world of Gladstone and Disraeli, but for most of the time were concerned with the protection of the old landed interest, characteristic of the eighteenth century. Like many of their peers, they lived hopelessly beyond their means with ruinous consequences. They were both emphatically Scottish, preoccupied with the intrigues of the insular social milieu in which they moved where everyone knew everyone else's business and where, despite intense disagreements, Whigs and Tories freely intermingled.

The tale is a parable for our times. In the frenetic squabbling and heated debates around Brexit and the divisive rhetoric of Donald Trump, it is very easy to imagine that the use of the media as a vehicle for hostile invective is new. The enmity between Whigs and Tories in early nineteenth century Scotland was as abusive and ended in tragedy.

## CHAPTER 2

### DUTY TO THE FAMILY OF AUCHINLECK

Sir Alexander Boswell was born on 9 October 1775 in Edinburgh, the third surviving child and first son of James Boswell, the essayist and diarist, and his wife Margaret Montgomerie. He was named after his grandfather Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck, a judge of the Court of Session, who took his title from his Ayrshire estate, to which as the eldest son James would succeed. His birth was a cause of considerable family excitement as there was now a male heir for the family's Ayrshire estate. James Boswell confided in his diary, 'I wrote several letters to announce my son's birth. I indulged some imaginations that he might perhaps be a great man'.<sup>1</sup> He confessed to William Temple, 'You know my dearest friend of what importance this is to me – of what importance it is to the Family of Auchinleck – which you may be well convinced is my supreme object in this world'.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander or Sandy, as he was known during his early years, was brought up with his younger brother James (Jamie, born 1780) and his three sisters, Veronica (born 1773), Euphemia (Effie, born 1774) and Elizabeth (Betsy, born 1780),<sup>3</sup> mostly in Edinburgh where his father was in practice as a barrister. James Boswell was by all accounts an affectionate and solicitous father. When the year-old Sandy was inoculated against small pox, his father was 'somewhat uneasy with apprehension'.<sup>4</sup> A year later he was taking him riding on his saddle bow.<sup>5</sup> Temple chided him:

You are by much too unguarded and familiar in your family. Children should have respect as well as love for their parents: but how can they if we say everything we think before them?<sup>6</sup>

Boswell was well aware of this failing, confiding in his journal that Sandy 'would be spoiled by indulgence, and had poor hopes of my own authority as a farther'.<sup>7</sup> However, he was filled with remorse when he was 'harsh to him'<sup>8</sup> and delighted when the three-year old called him *Papax*, 'for I wished there should be affection between me and my son'.<sup>9</sup> When he was four and a half, Sandy had been given a Shetland pony that made him 'very

happy' and instilled a love of riding that was to last for the rest of his life.<sup>10</sup> Within a year he and his father were riding out together.

Boswell's affection for his children can partly be explained by the lack of it from his own father and by a morbid fascination with the imminence of death that stemmed from a stern Calvinism upbringing. His father had made him learn the psalms by heart and recite them to him on Sunday evenings.<sup>11</sup> Fear of eternal retribution terrified him and kept him awake at night.<sup>12</sup> Although his relations with his own father, Lord Auchinleck, were often fraught, James was fiercely proud of his ancestry and, despite his wife's disapproval, he drummed into his heir the importance of his feudal inheritance:

But as I have great enjoyment in our fancied dignity, and cannot be persuaded but that we do appear of more consequence in the county [Ayrshire] than others, from a certain reserve which has always been maintained, and am also of the opinion that this pride makes us act in a nobler manner, I wish to encourage it: and my wife therefore should at least not oppose it. My son Sandy seems to imbibe it as I could desire. I catechize him thus: 'What is your duty?' 'My duty is to GOD.' 'What is your second duty?' 'My duty to the family of Auchinleck.' 'Who was the first laird of Auchinleck?' 'Thomas Boswell.' 'From whom did he get the estate?' 'From his king.' 'Who was his king.' 'King James IV of Scotland.' 'What became of Thomas Boswell?' 'He was killed at Falloden Field fighting with his king against the English, for Scotland and England were then two kingdoms.'<sup>13</sup>

By the age of seven, Sandy was able to repeat 'the history of the Lairds of Auchinleck, that he may hold the family in some degree sacred'.<sup>14</sup>

Although not referred to in Boswell's journals, he must have infected Sandy with his love of Scots songs and airs. James was always singing and both collected and wrote songs, examples Sandy was to follow.<sup>15</sup> Later in life Sandy recalled his father teaching him the song 'Ah me! When shall I marry me?' by Oliver Goldsmith to the tune the 'Humours of Limerick' (Humours of Balamagairy) that had to be left out of the first production of Goldsmith's play 'She Stoops to Conquer', because the leading actress could not sing.<sup>16</sup> He described it as 'a most beautiful air I have long admired'.<sup>17</sup>

James continued to idolise his son: 'My son Sandy is really a fine boy, I should keep a register of his progress... he is honest and kind and has quite the air of a gentleman'.<sup>18</sup> Sandy was sent to a 'reading school' at the age of five, but when he did not like it his indulgent father allowed him to withdraw and began himself to ground his son in Latin. Sandy was later sent to the High School, but was sometimes absent on account of the discomfort of an inguinal hernia.<sup>19</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that this was a happy home. James's heavy drinking, gambling and womanizing, that he did nothing to conceal, often led to domestic quarrels and even violence, which the children cannot have failed to notice. After his wife read an account of one of his sexual exploits, James recorded in his journal:

She was shocked and declared that all connections between her and me was now at an end and that she would continue to live with me only for decency and the sake of her children.<sup>20</sup>

Family life was now divided between Edinburgh and Ayrshire, where his mother's family had property at Lainshaw in Stewarton. Wherever they were they were surrounded by friends, relations and admirers. These included a distant cousin Dr. Charles Stuart of Dunearn, an eccentric clergyman turned physician and his son James. The two families were known to each other, not least because both Dr. Charles Stuart, himself, and his father-in-law, the Reverend Dr. John Erskine of Old Greyfriars were leading figures in Edinburgh society. James Boswell noted in his journal on 9 October 1774: 'I was at the New Church and heard Mr Walker and Mr Stuart of Crammond, who preached on a gloomy subject: death being without any order'.<sup>21</sup>

Even whilst his own father was very much alive, James Boswell sought romantically to extend the family's patrimony in the county.

What is the first minister of state in London, personally, when compared with a duke, or an earl, a knight or a squire, the lord of a manor, and a proprietor of extensive domain in the country? . . . He, who is master of land sees all around him obedient to his will, not only can he totally change the face of inanimate nature, but command the animals of each species, and even the human race itself, to multiply or to diminish, to continue or to migrate, according to his pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

As he was to discover to his cost, this was easier said than done. In 1767 with support of a loan from his father and other backers he bought for just under £2,500 the small estate of Dalblair to the east of Cumnock which runs up the Glenmuir Water to the De'ls Barn Door. Although beautiful, it is mostly either marsh or peat bog. Instead of paying off the debt as opportunity arose, he spent freely, allowing the debts to accumulate to the point where the interest payments were more than his income.<sup>23</sup> He was not to be deterred from his ambition to be a laird and sought advice on 'county affairs' from Alexander Fairlie, the distinguished agriculturalist and factor to the Earl of Eglinton.<sup>24</sup>

In August 1782, Sandy's grandfather, Lord Auchinleck, died at the age of seventy-six. When he was in Edinburgh, James Boswell and his young family had often visited and were frequently met with a frosty reception. The children, usually central to family life – from an early age the children dined with their parents and guests, however distinguished – were, much to James Boswell's regret, not welcome at Auchinleck. Shortly before his father's death, he noted in his journal after a trip into the Edinburgh countryside, 'The boys were delighted, running about in the garden and fields. It vexed me that they were banished from Auchinleck'.<sup>25</sup> Lady Auchinleck, whom he cruelly nicknamed *noverca* – the step-mother, was the principal cause. She was a cousin, the daughter of John Boswell of Balmuto in Fife. From the beginning of the relationship, James had disapproved of his father's choice of a second wife, partly for the selfish reason that if she survived him she would need to be supported by the estate.<sup>26</sup> They rarely got on, and after her husband's death Lady Auchinleck lived permanently in Edinburgh.

James Boswell's own mother, Euphemia Erskine, the daughter of Colonel John Erskine of Halton, had died in 1766. He had been devoted to her. James, as the eldest son, inherited the Ayrshire estate. This had been strictly entailed by Lord Auchinleck in the unlikely event of his improvident son being tempted to mortgage, or worse, sell it. Under the terms of a Scottish entail, a property could only be enjoyed by the owner as a tenant for life. It could not be mortgaged or sold and at this time the entail could only be broken by an expensive Act of Parliament. With his curmudgeonly father dead and his stepmother out of the way, James and his family were free to visit Auchinleck as much as they liked. Sandy quickly fell in love with Ayrshire and its people.

After inheriting Auchinleck, James Boswell wisely left the management of the estate to his agent and lawyer, Bruce Campbell, and his factor, Andrew Gibb, but he took a considerable interest in its affairs not least because he was always anxious for whatever income it could produce.<sup>27</sup> As he feared, his father had made handsome provision for his widow, giving her the rents of twenty-seven of the best farms on the estate over and above an annuity of £500 a year that was part of her marriage settlement.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless in most years James could expect to receive some £1,100, out of which he would need to meet the expense of running the estate. This would leave him with about £800 a year – a handsome income but not sufficient to sustain James Boswell's extravagant lifestyle and to pay off his not inconsiderable debts.<sup>29</sup>

In 1785 he acquired the farm of Willockstown or Willockshill, that adjoined the Auchinleck estate, from the trustees of the Earl of Loudon on

which he borrowed £470 from Dr Andrew Mitchell, the minister of Monkton, near Ayr.<sup>30</sup> So as to increase his income and in keeping with the fashion of the times, he gave notice in 1786 that he would 'inclose in divisions' several of the farms on the estate, build new farmhouses, improve the drainage and plant hedgerows and clumps of trees to serve as windbreaks.<sup>31</sup> Altogether over the next decade James spent a modest £1,256 on these improvements and the development of the Birnieknow coal and Gaswater lime workings.<sup>32</sup> Less judiciously he borrowed at least £6,000 to enlarge his property by buying the adjacent estates of Ochiltree and Knockroon.<sup>33</sup> The latter belonged to a cousin whose affairs were embarrassed as a result of the failure of the Douglas & Heron Bank. Writing to Sandy in 1790 when the purchase of Knockroon between Cumnock and Auchinleck was being concluded, he confided: 'I would rather live on bread and water for years than suffer this ancient part of the Barony to be purchased by a stranger'.<sup>34</sup> Such sentiment probably led him to overlook the condition of the property. Three years later the tenant George Irven reported that the offices 'have become almost not tenantable and even dangerous'.<sup>35</sup>

Boswell had long hankered after settling in London, away from claustrophobic Edinburgh society and where his sons could be educated at English schools. Early in 1786, his wife Margaret seriously ill with consumption, he moved to London with the intention of joining the English bar, leaving his family behind until the autumn. The girls were sent as day pupils to a boarding school, while Sandy went to the Soho Academy where, as in Edinburgh, his education was interrupted by bouts of ill-health.<sup>36</sup> Actually, the family soon tired of London and longed for the open skies of Ayrshire. James became depressed and in April 1787 broke down in front of Sandy, who consoled him: 'Oh Papa, this is not like yourself'.<sup>37</sup> They spent five weeks at Auchinleck during the summer, returning to London in September. Over the next year Boswell was pre-occupied with juggling writing his life of Johnson and trying to find work at the bar, while Margaret became progressively ill. Early in 1788 she determined to go home.<sup>38</sup> James Boswell and the family with the exception of Veronica went with them. He returned to London in October, taking the boys with him to resume their studies under a private tutor.

While James completed the life, letters from Auchinleck brought tidings of further deterioration in Margaret's health. Ill as she was, she was concerned for her husband. Jamie told him, 'Papa, you say that I'm a great charge trusted by Mama to Sandy and you. But you are the charge trusted to us, for she writes to both of us to take care of you'.<sup>39</sup> Then, in December, Margaret cautioned Sandy, 'The improving of your mind by study and apprehension will be the most lasting proof you can give him of your

gratitude towards him, as it will manifest to the world that he judged rightly in yielding to you, contrary to the opinion of his friends, in giving you a private tutor'.<sup>40</sup> It would seem likely that Sandy responded to his mother's anxiety by trying to cajole his father in returning to Auchinleck, as James wrote to William Temple in March 1789, 'I leave my sons in my house with the old houskeeper and my footmann. I *must* send the eldest from home; for he begins to oppose me, and no wonder'.<sup>41</sup>

Sandy and Jamie never saw their mother again. She died in May just days before their return. The grieving family spent the whole summer at Auchinleck, only returning to London in October. Boswell immediately arranged for Sandy to go to Eton as he had 'a great ambition to have Alexander the second an accomplished gentleman'.<sup>42</sup> He chose Eton because 'the people whom I see come up from Edinburgh are generally so inferior in speech and manners to every genteel person here that I am anxious you should be well established as a *gentleman*'.<sup>43</sup>

Alexander – now older, Sandy was known once more by his given name – was deeply unhappy and lonely at Eton, partly because his hernia prevented him from joining in games with his classmates. He continually pleaded with his father to come and visit him and James regularly made excuses that he was prevented by his own poor state of health or more probably his womanising. Boswell wrote unfeelingly to William Temple:

My eldest son has been at Eton since the 15 of Ocotber. You cannot imagine how miserable he has been. He wrote to me for some time as if from the galleys, and intreated me to come to him. I did what was better; I sent his uncle David, who was firm.<sup>44</sup>

There was another reason for Alexander's unhappiness, he preferred life in the country where a gentleman 'may live an Innocent, Temperate and useful life loved by his Tenants, blessed by the poor, respected by his neighbours, he ought to take care of his own affairs and not leave that to others'.<sup>45</sup> When James complained of his personal financial difficulties, Alexander chided him, 'I really think the most eligible thing would Be to hurry on your book & then to settle at Auchinleck for some time till you see your affairs begin to alter'.<sup>46</sup>

Alexander had grown into a tall athletic young man with an unattractive face whose main feature was a large and inquisitive nose.<sup>47</sup> As an eight-year old he had exhibited a quite precocious interest in golf<sup>48</sup> and now what delighted him most was to be at Auchinleck with a horse to ride out on the hill ground behind Dalblair and a gun to shoot the moorfowl, unlike his father 'who never could learn the art'.<sup>49</sup> In June 1792 Alexander wrote to the factor, 'tell Hugh Hare [the gamekeeper] to have plenty of *old hats* ready



that if other sports fail I may at least have them to shoot at or see you fire at them without *shot* as you *so wisely* did last year'.<sup>50</sup> And in August 1792 Alexander's father wrote to him, 'I am very glad to see your attention to all things about Auchinleck'<sup>51</sup>, and he confided in Temple, 'My eldest son went thither some time ago to enjoy the grouse shooting. I trusted him alone, as he is a steady boy'.<sup>52</sup> On such visits James encouraged Alexander to act as laird in his stead, for example, in the summer of the following year he would instruct Alexander to lay on a 'good substantial dinner' for the ordination of the new minister of Auchinleck, John Lindsay, with 'Port and Sherry and punch and some bottles of my Old Malaga', adding 'But there must be no excess'.<sup>53</sup>

Despite his reluctance, Eton did do Alexander some good. He became an accomplished Latin scholar, a poet, and perhaps more surprisingly a fine draughtsman, a musician and he developed an interest in science. When he visited Auchinleck in that summer of 1792 he was saddened to see how much of the old house, which his grandfather had replaced, had fallen down. He penned a poem: 'The Swallows lament on the downfall of the old house of Affleck'. (In the local Ayrshire dialect Auchinleck is pronounced Affleck in much the same way as Tarbolton is pronounced Tarbouton and Kirkoswald Kirkousel. It was only in the late eighteenth century that the name was standardized to Auchinleck, but Affleck still survives in the name of the mill on the Lugar water.)

To Regions afar where Soles temperate beam  
 Enlivens the prospect & plays on the stream  
 I flew over the well known approach of the blast  
 Over Ocean's expanse on light pinions I past

And now warned by instinct a more gentle air  
 Invites my return to Affleck and loves care  
 But Ah! What a change what a ruinous scene  
 The mansion is level, alas with the Green!

Here in windows I happy could build the round nest,  
 No chamber Maid dire, with her broom to molest,  
 But time, crewel time, has this mansion destroy'd,  
 And envied poor Swallows the bliss they enjoyed.<sup>54</sup>

Writing poetry became a sort of competition between Alexander and his brother, James the younger (Jamie), three years his junior and to whom Alexander was to remain closely attached throughout his life. Not wishing them both to attend the same school and wanting Jamie, on whom he doted, to be near at home, Boswell had sent him to Westminster where he excelled

in the classics and became keenly interested in the theatre. The brothers regularly exchanged letters and both seem to have flirted with the fast 'fancy' set of sporting gentlemen. In a letter back in January 1791 James described in graphic detail attending the famous prize fight when 'Big Ben' [Benjamin Brain] defeated Tom Johnson, then the champion of England, describing it as an 'obstinate and bloody battle' and commenting 'they were both maimed'.<sup>55</sup> An interest in pugilism remained with Jamie for the rest of his life.

On leaving Eton in 1792, Alexander was determined to go to Edinburgh University to complete his education by taking in his first year classes in advanced Greek, logic, moral philosophy and natural philosophy (physics). He expressed a desire not to lodge with a professor and his family as many of the sons of the gentry did, but to have his own lodgings where he could entertain his fellow students to tea.<sup>56</sup> His father undoubtedly wished him to go to Oxford and this probably explains a remorseful comment from Alexander to his father in July 1792: 'I hope that during the course of my life I may have it in my power to do something (however little prospect I now have) which may recommend me to the recollection of after times which may shew me not unworthy of you'.<sup>57</sup> This must have brought back bitter memories of Boswell's very strained relations at the same age with his own father, Lord Auckinleck. In October he assured his son that 'It gives me great uneasiness to perceive that you entertain apprehension of my affection being alienated, in any degree from you'.<sup>58</sup> By then James was reconciled to Alexander attending Edinburgh, probably because he was once more in straitened financial circumstances. Writing in December 1793 in response to a request from Alexander for money, he complained 'I am in that degree of embarrassment which makes me uneasy. My expense on the estate was considerable this year as I built seven houses at the Coalwork, & one at Burnhouse, and paid for two roads and a bridge a good deal of money. But I wish to make the Estate flourish'.<sup>59</sup> The following month he wrote urgently 'I must delay every expense that I can help'.<sup>60</sup>

James Boswell was definitely in financial difficulties. He owed his Edinburgh bankers, Sir William Forbes & Co. £1,375 in 1792, and they were pressing for additional security, which he was not in a position to give. Two years later the interest on the overdraft was still unpaid.<sup>61</sup> Sir William Forbes & Co. had an associate bank in Ayr, known as Hunter & Co. which remitted money to them from local clients. James's correspondence with his factor, Andrew Gibb, during these years referred repeatedly to his urgent need for cash: 'I hope you will be able to send some money to the Ayr Bank' in February 1792 and in December of that year he was disappointed only to receive £330 in income for the half year.<sup>62</sup> By the spring of 1794 he had

resorted to deceiving the Ayr Bank, where one of his cousins, Hamilton D Boswell, was a partner by instructing Andrew Gibb to remit money to his London bankers via the Ayr branch of the Bank of Scotland.<sup>63</sup> Although the Ayr Bank was happy to be accommodating 'from the friendship you have always shown our house', they were not prepared to bend their rules to help him, for example by allowing him to borrow against the security of the rents of the entailed estate.<sup>64</sup> James's financial troubles were not due entirely to improvidence, but also to a certain sentimentality in the management of his estates. At one moment he would adopt the guise of a fierce and intolerant landowner, telling his factor sententiously in 1793 that 'no estate can flourish where the tenants are not kept to steady order and regularity'.<sup>65</sup> As Andrew Gibb knew only too well, this is just what his laird failed to do, for instance, in 1791 he had instructed: 'As Andrew Dalrymple my late tenant has behaved very ill let him be apprehended and imprisoned. I am very unwilling to proceed to extremities; but an example must be made in such a case'.<sup>66</sup> Yet months later Dalrymple was still at large. James was unwilling to amalgamate farms as his neighbours were doing to create viable units as 'I do not like to throw farms together and depopulate the country'.<sup>67</sup> More seriously for his own financial position, he was invariably willing to allow rent arrears to accumulate or rents to be reduced at the first cry of hardship.

Meanwhile, Alexander only intended to stay two years at Edinburgh, which was not uncommon at the time. During his second year he attended lectures by Professor Dugald Stewart, who spent his summer months at Catrine, near Auchinleck, and knew Alexander's father. Stewart was a lecturer of extraordinary eloquence with considerable sympathy with the views of the French philosophes, but not with the course of the Revolution. It is possible that Alexander Boswell inherited from Stewart his dislike of the control of Scottish politics by the Tory Henry Dundas, Lord Melville. However as he confessed to his brother, Jamie, in March 1794, his political views were unformed:

I am so little of a politician that in fact I find it difficult to give my opinion on any one subject that requires penetration. I can easily state difficulties which must be encountered on both sides of the question but I cannot shew the means of subduing them either: after considering both aspects & the arguments on both sides instead of drawing a certain conclusion from them I generally end up with an exclamation of doubt. . . . After considering the argument on Both Sides -I am clearly of opinion that the War ought to be -continued. In Peace & War Our fate is equally uncertain, I therefore think that it is better to trust to the Justice of our cause & the Bravery of our Soldiers which will remain the same long after the French paroxysm is over, than to the Faith (allowing they would be willing to make Peace) of an inveterate treacherous unprincipled Enemy.<sup>68</sup>

He went on to comment wistfully to Jamie the following year, ‘Foresight in politicks is as impossible as in the events of human life’.<sup>69</sup> Contrary to later commentary on his life, such uncertainty about the major political questions of the day was to characterise much of his career. At the same time though, Alexander was extending his interest in science by attending chemistry lectures and acquiring apparatus to conduct experiments. On clear nights he could be found on Calton Hill studying the spheres. Despite his antipathy to the Revolution, he also learned to speak and write French fluently, taking classes from a private tutor.

While in Edinburgh, in imitation of his father, he developed a keen wit, sending James telling caricatures of those he encountered -with strict instructions for the papers’ destruction. His father warned him to be careful lest such sharp barbs might land him in trouble:

It pleases me to observe your attention to *character* and *manners*, and the shrewdness of your remarks. But as you yourself suggest you may write in that free manner confidentially to me, and I desire you may continue so to do. But you must be very cautious of letting other people know that you are such an *observer*, and such a *ensor morum*, as they may be apt to misunderstand, and form a wrong notion of you. I speak from experience; because I am certain that there is not in reality a more benevolent man than myself in the World; and yet from my having indulged myself without reserve in discriminative delineations of a variety of people, I know I am thought by many to be ill-natured, nay from the specimens which I have given to the World of my uncommon recollections of conversations, many foolish persons have been afraid to meet me; vainly apprehending that *their* conversations Would be *recorded*.<sup>70</sup>

A year later when Alexander was still in Edinburgh, James reminded him: ‘But *memento* you are a *young laird* in a *plotting town*’.<sup>71</sup> It may be that what prompted this exchange was the theft of Alexander’s collection of songs, if his later lampooning was anything to go by.<sup>72</sup> James Boswell was no doubt thinking of his own close scrapes with those he had offended, such as the young William Miller, an Ayrshire neighbour, who sought satisfaction for an attack on his father Sir Thomas Miller in 1774.<sup>73</sup> Whatever the motivation, this sage advice his son was to ignore, ultimately at the cost of his life.

Having completed his two years at Edinburgh, James wished Alexander to follow in his footsteps by studying civil law at a Dutch university, either Leiden or Utrecht, with a view to becoming an advocate. The war made this impractical and James suggested the inns of court or Oxford; as he confided in his other son, Jamie, ‘I am hurt by his [Alexander’s] loud and unpolished manners; and I find that he is accustomed to domineer over the country

people who pay great court to him, and talk of me as *the old man*'.<sup>74</sup> While James senior was, unusually, staying at Auchinleck for a long period during the late summer and autumn of 1794, he tried to tackle these shortcomings – as he perceived them – by listening to Alexander recite Latin and Greek. Writing to Jamie in July while Alexander was away at the races, he said:

I heard him read some Horace only one morning. When he returns I shall hear him read some Greek and Latin every day, and shall also be at pains to correct a loud familiarity of manners and a very broad pronunciation which he has acquired by being so long in Scotland and so much of late among his inferiors. It is truly humiliating to perceive the coarseness of language and behaviour in Scotland'.<sup>75</sup>

Alexander himself, was not keen to be weaned away from his Scottish roots, preferring to remain in Edinburgh, taking civil law classes. Disappointed, his father again urged coming south when it became known that the professor of civil law was indisposed.<sup>76</sup> He later changed his mind, telling his son unfeelingly, 'I cannot approve of your going to London this winter, for many reasons. In the first place, I do not know of any person there who could assist you in the study of Civil Law: and I am sorry to say you know how uncertain my help would be. Then it must be kept in mind, that I am very much abroad in London at a variety of houses, and cannot take upon me to introduce you to many of my acquaintances: so you would be for the most part with your sisters'.<sup>77</sup> This response cannot have but upset Alexander, particularly as he had seen his father write almost daily to his brother Jamie during the summer.<sup>78</sup> Jamie, however, was only too willing to comply with their father's wishes and go to Oxford when he left Westminster. Seeing Alexander was firmly settled in Edinburgh, James urged him not to neglect his study of the classics, mathematics and French. Alexander had no difficulty with these subjects, but he had come to detest the law and was determined under no circumstances to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

Amongst his classmates in law was James Skene of Rubislaw in Aberdeenshire, whose background was very similar to Alexander's own and was destined for a career at the bar. They became firm friends and enlisted together as troopers in the Royal Edinburgh Volunteer Light Dragoons when it was raised early in 1794.<sup>79</sup> Amongst their fellow recruits were Boswell's cousin, James Stuart the younger, of Dunearn, Sir David Hunter Blair and David Laing, who was to become a prominent Edinburgh bookseller and bibliophile.<sup>80</sup> The raising of volunteer regiments was a significant landmark in the reassertion of Scottish national consciousness, which was to be fed by the idolisation of Robert Burns and the writings of

Sir Walter Scott.<sup>81</sup> Alexander took to soldiering with the same enthusiasm as he had field sports. Looking back on these happy times two years later, he wrote from Auchinleck to James Skene, who was now plying his trade as an advocate:

Well sir, here I am snug. All that I can wish excepting now & then a room with such a trooper as yourself which by and with the blessing of Providence I mean to have again in Summer if you abide in Town. My Horse look ye stands fine like – like a Salamander dash my Whig!<sup>82</sup>

That winter, James Boswell renewed his insistence that Alexander should go away: in the summer of 1795 he should attend Leipzig University and spend some time in Dresden.<sup>83</sup> This appealed to Alexander as it afforded the possibility of learning German and, perhaps more importantly, of taking fencing lessons. However, before these plans could be set in motion, James fell ill and subsequently died in London on 19 May 1795. His body was taken to Scotland for burial in the family mausoleum that had been built by Alexander's grandfather, Lord Auchinleck. The funeral was a farce, the cortege arriving at the wrong time in the wrong place, by which time the tenants were either drunk or had gone home. Andrew Gibb, the factor, was so incensed he recommended the undertaker should not be paid as he had 'sacrificed his duty & grocely misconducted the whole business'.<sup>84</sup>

Since Alexander was not yet twenty-one, his affairs were administered by curators (trustees); Sir William Forbes, the Edinburgh banker to whom James Boswell was heavily indebted, and Claud Irvine Boswell, a cousin and Edinburgh advocate, who later became a judge with the title Lord Balmuto after his estate in Fife.<sup>85</sup> During his time in Edinburgh Claud Boswell had become almost a second father to Alexander, all too willing to tell him off when the need arose. In the late summer Alexander set off for Germany probably out of a sense of filial duty, leaving his curators to sort out his father's tangled affairs.

They quickly made it clear it was not in their power as curators to grant the tenants on the Auchinleck estate 'further indulgence' for the often long-standing arrears in rent. Persistent offenders were ordered to be removed and those that remained and were in arrears were told to provide bills of exchange to cover sums outstanding. In addition, the factor was instructed to incur no further expenses without express permission.<sup>86</sup> A bill of exchange was, in effect, a promise to pay at a certain date along with any interest that had accrued. An advantage for the lender was that they could be discounted or sold at less than the sum due, the buyer becoming responsible for recovering the debt. It soon became clear that the estates of Ochiltree and Knockroon and the lands of Dalblair and Willockshill, which

were not covered by the entail, were so burdened with debt that they would have to be sold along with much of James's personal property as well as all the furniture and plate at Auchinleck and the furniture, books and pictures in his London home, including those recently acquired from the estate of the artist, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Alexander concurred on the understanding that he could not sell his mother's fifteen-year-old cow, or his father's twenty-four year old horse that he had promised could run about for the rest of his life.<sup>87</sup>

After the land had been sold and the books, plate and furnishings valued, there remained, in the spring of 1801, an estimated difference of about £2,000 between their value and James's total personal debts – excluding the mortgages over the Ochiltree estate and a bond due to the Ayr Bank of Hunter & Co. of £2,000. This was to be taken over by Alexander and a further bond of £2,000 issued in his name, leaving him about £4,000 in debt when he took possession of the Auchinleck estate.<sup>88</sup> Apart from the estate, he was also left his grandfather's plate and more importantly the fine library of early printed classical texts which he had collected as a young man. However, the trustees for Alexander's brother and sisters contested his right to these and the books and plate were packed in boxes and sent to Sir William Forbes to be stored in his bank's vaults in Edinburgh pending a final settlement.

Quite apart from the interest on the bonds, Alexander had other charges to meet out of the income of the entailed estates as his father had made generous provision in his will for his brother, Jamie, and their two surviving sisters, along with the annuity of £500 a year that had a for younger children and widows was common at the time and left many landed proprietors burdened with obligations that they could only meet by borrowing heavily. It is not entirely clear from the surviving records how much this would have left Alexander to live off. For all his father's improvement, the rental of the entailed estate was now just under £2,000, not much more than it had been when his father had inherited it a decade earlier.<sup>89</sup> This would have probably left him with a gross income of some £800 a year out of which had to be met various charges, such as his share of the stipends of the local ministers and schoolteachers and taxes, along with the costs of running the estate particularly any improvements he wished to make. Altogether he might expect to net something in the region of £400 a year, just about enough to live off prudently, but not enough to be able to afford to buy a commission in the army.

While Sir William Forbes and Claud Irvine Boswell were busy settling his father's estate, Alexander Boswell remained in Leipzig learning German, how to fence proficiently and – at least at first – enjoying himself.

On his arrival in Hamburg, he wrote enthusiastically to Forbes, 'I am amused with everything for everything is new and if I can get as much useful knowledge as I get entertainment I shall be content'.<sup>90</sup> He travelled on by way of the university town of Halle where he was disappointed not to meet the ruler, the Duke of Brunswick. When he reached Leipzig – 'the finest town I have seen in Germany', he joined the library on condition they took another English newspaper in addition to the 'rascally Morning Chronicle, considered to be the paper of the French'.<sup>91</sup> Alexander engaged a language teacher and fencing master with whom 'I exercise myself & learn German *practically*', but he did not matriculate at the university as his German was not good enough to understand the lectures.<sup>92</sup> He bought a horse, 'a sober ride', which also served to pull his gig, and his later prowess as a horseman almost certainly owed something to his time in Leipzig.

By the spring, however, the novelty of the country had worn off. Alexander wrote home that if you counted 'the Graces as well as the Muses, one might as well with almost equal rationality seek for Ice at the Equator'.<sup>93</sup> Homesick, he began writing verse in 'Scotch Rhyme', as he told his brother, James, in an effort 'to save from oblivion little anecdotes of the family'. He added that when he returned, together they must make a thorough search of the 'Ebony Cabinet' in which family heirlooms and papers had been stored by their father.<sup>94</sup> Alexander left Leipzig in March 1796, travelling home by way of Meissen and Dresden where he visited the museum and library, which he was pleased to find contained the recently published *Antiquities of Scotland* by Francis Grosse.<sup>95</sup> He was delighted to be entertained at the court of the Elector of Saxony where his father had been a guest thirty or forty years before: 'of which I had heard so much when sitting on his knee and listening to the stories that he told of the old Princes and their hospitable splendour'. Before sailing for home, he finally visited Potsdam and Berlin.<sup>96</sup> On getting back to London in June, he described it as 'true a feast after Germanic dullness'.<sup>97</sup>



## CHAPTER 3

### THE AUCHINLECK INHERITANCE, MAKING ENDS MEET

Arriving home and having attained his majority, Alexander had at once to take up the reins of the estate. His friend and factor, Andrew Gibb welcomed him thus: 'I trust that business will in a short time become a pleasure to you in place of a vexatious load, a little experience will make you complete master of it'.<sup>1</sup> But Alexander had much to trouble him. Since his father had only ever stayed briefly at Auchinleck after his grandfather's death, the house, garden and home farm were neglected. He found the furniture in many of the rooms was old and worn and he was obliged to accept it on loan from his father's trustees along with some of the family portraits and pictures in London.<sup>2</sup> The walled garden was only equipped with three iron rakes, three push hoes, two spades, two wheelbarrows, a grape (four-pronged pitch fork), a scythe, a garden line and iron reel, a wooden rake, two pairs of garden scissors and a broken hot bed frame. There was almost no equipment in the home farm, just a plow, a harrow, a cart, a dyke spade and nine hay forks.<sup>3</sup> Alexander at once set about putting the house in order, fixing doors and locks and buying new garden tools. Despite his father's improvements many of the farms were not in a much better state. Andrew Gibb reported that Mr. Wilson's house at Birnieknow was 'in a miserable state and the poor man's life is almost in danger'.<sup>4</sup> John Wright, the tenant in Kinstie, and his family were reported to be 'in danger of losing their lives this winter from the frail state of his houses and during some of the high winds he actually fled with his family to some of the neighbouring farmhouses for shelter'.<sup>5</sup> Although Alexander had no alternative but to attend to such urgent repairs, he had no money to invest in any improvements which were necessary if he was to keep his best tenants and raise rents.

As Andrew Gibb had feared, the young Alexander found the management of the estate and local affairs irksome, and who could blame him when many of his contemporaries were engaged in the passage of arms on land and sea? He hankered after his brief time in the Edinburgh Volunteer Cavalry, chiding his friend James Skene, who had just been promoted to sergeant:

It may be sport to you to sit down of a Sunday and scribble nonsense to bamboozle our rustic brain-cases – but let me inform you Sirra that your four stipes on your arm (if such you have – I would rather they were on your back) I say these stripes give you no right to cajole honest peoples heads with your military – Astronomical – philosophical – nonsensical – incomprehensible – abominable – unintelligible botheration.<sup>6</sup>

A month later he confessed he led ‘a most idle life’ and whiled away the long winter evenings in the library writing a ‘multitude of songs’.<sup>7</sup> He had several musical instruments to call on, a harpsichord, piano-forte, bass viol and a violin.<sup>8</sup> No doubt neighbours who could play were pressed into service to make up an orchestra. In this frame of mind he decided he would not live permanently at Auchinleck and he gave his sister, Euphemia, free run of the house as she had no home since his father’s London house had been given up. Alexander’s brother, Jamie, and youngest sister, Elizabeth, went to live with their uncle Thomas, who worked for the Admiralty in London.

It seems that Alexander intended to spend most of his time in Edinburgh or in London, but it is not clear how he intended to make a living, now that he had abandoned the law, except possibly by pursuing his literary endeavours. In 1797 he translated Johann Martin Usteri’s poem which he circulated to friends.<sup>9</sup>

Taste life’s glad moments  
 Whilst the wasting taper glows;  
 Pluck, ere it withers,  
 The quickening fading rose.

He was complimented on the quality of his rendition by his father’s friend, Walter Scott, to whom he sent a copy. Scott added, ‘if you are fond of the Ballads & Minstrel ditties of this island I flatter myself I can in some degree afford you a similar gratification for I have been long a Black letter scholar & yet longer a collector of the poetical commemorations of our Border wars’.<sup>10</sup>

Less memorable was Boswell’s elegy on a young woman butchered by a sergeant of the ‘Scots Royals’, which ended:

She turned her lovely eyes to heaven  
 The wretch the weapon drew  
 To murder used he ne’er demur’d  
 Without one passing or pitying word  
 He fairly ran her through.<sup>11</sup>

Such compositions were hardly likely to make his fortune. In 1798 he confided to Sir William Forbes, ‘I find myself in as difficult and humiliating a situation as extravagance could have reduced me to’.<sup>12</sup> His other trustee, Claud Irvine Boswell, intervened when the ‘difficulty of my situation were laid before me in very strong terms’ in an effort – in Alexander’s perception – to ‘terrify me into caution & petrify me into coolness’.<sup>13</sup> He hankered after adventure: ‘Fame, Glory & Renown we must make sure of, & therefore, let us have our Ossian for I hope little from Maitland’s commentaries’.

The final sale of the unentailed parts of the estate in April 1799 put Alexander in mind to join the Austrian army or to follow in his father’s footsteps on a tour of the Highlands. The year before Alexander and Jamie had undertaken a similar ‘pedestrian expedition’ in Wales and, although he kept a journal, it was ‘too *meagre* in James’s [junior] opinion to be entertaining’.<sup>14</sup> Alexander, too, had begun to take an interest in his father’s literary works, reading his *Life of Johnson* seriously for the first time and enjoying it.<sup>15</sup> He expressed his own frustration at the lack of an obvious career in song:

Each has a’ his humour or whim & why not  
 Is chuse for one’s self sure in fame is no blot  
 When hobbies are harmless as hobbies may be  
 You all may have hobbies my hearties for me  
 One mounts on a plea or pulls tight in the middle  
 One rides a tame Borough & one on a fiddle  
 One jockeys Baraltes curvets on a leech  
 And vaults on a theory published by Creech. •<sup>16</sup>

(• William Creech the Edinburgh publisher)

The only excitement Alexander now found in Ayrshire was in raising a troop of cavalry volunteers, but even this was not without its irritations. His tenantry were not much enamoured with the idea that: ‘some are affraid that they become *sojers*, some “dinna half like it”, others “hanna time”, others say “hoot the Frenchies is no ga’n to come *here*’.<sup>17</sup> It was during the shooting season in the late autumn he was at his happiest, out with his gun and two pointers in the woods around the house – one of the first things he had done on returning to Auchinleck was to have all the sporting guns repaired.<sup>18</sup>

On setting off for an extended stay in London and Oxford, where his brother, Jamie, had gone to study law, early in 1799, Alexander wrote to Skene: ‘Edinburgh will have a jubilee from my satyre for one winter at least, and my credit will diminish which always outstrip’d my real merit in that *line*’.<sup>19</sup> Unlike his father, he had little interest in womanising, writing

somewhat prudishly from London in June: 'It has been rather customary to see a young fellow walking in the Gardens with a couple of Whores, I never had courage to recognise one nor never shall'.<sup>20</sup> This did not prevent him chatting up pretty women, however. He spent part of a journey by coach from London catching the eye of one of his travelling companions, only to discover to his horror that her husband was riding outside. Nor did it stop him writing salacious verse in the manner of Robert Burns. Walking back to his lodgings up Bond Street on a summer's evening later in the year he espied a handsome Irish milkmaid. He hurried home and penned 'Freddie's in Want of a Girl' to the tune 'Up wi the Souters of Selkirk':

By my conscience then if he sh'd find her  
 he's spring on her top like a squiel  
 And tip her a rub of his grinder  
     Hay dally huddlly hay  
     Hay dally ho could I find her  
     Hee dally hay dally hee  
     I'd tip her a rub o my grinder

When last we were making of hay  
 I courted a ruddy faced lass  
 On a pair of plump buttocks she lay  
 So pretty stretched on the grass

*Chorus*

Norah cried I here's the boy  
 Can play up so neatly your crack  
 To set you a kicking my joy  
 I'll tip you the spring of my back

*Chorus*

Talking is all Bodderation  
 Its best to look sharp & be blunt  
 Here take *him* if you have occasion  
 For fear you catch cold in your C\_\_

*Chorus*

How sweetly she smil'd condescension  
 And tuck'd up her smock to her chin  
 Arra now shew your pretension  
 And bother you cram it all in.

*Chorus*

For ever a leg I've a stocking  
 For ever a foot I've a shoe  
 Bother you now o' for mocking  
 But do away what you can do

*Chorus*

O then tearing the Virgin assunder  
 I rattled away in her lap  
 Then shower followed after the Thunder  
 But I rose with a thundering clap.

*Chorus*

This may well have been a heartfelt paean as quite suddenly in the autumn of 1799 Alexander announced he was going to be married – to an heiress: Grizel or Grace Cuming, the daughter of Thomas Cuming, a wealthy Edinburgh banker, and his wife, Janet Chalmers, the first cousin of Boswell's neighbour at Barskimming, Sir William Miller, who sat in the Court of Session as Lord Glenlee, and was to become a close friend.<sup>21</sup> Grizel's father was dead, but her brother, George, was still a banker in the city and on her grandmother's death she would share (with her three sisters) in her grandfather William Cuming's substantial estate of over £40,000.<sup>22</sup> After she accepted his hand, he hurried round to tell Sir William Forbes but lacked the courage to knock at the door 'for which unaccountable weakness you must forgive me'.<sup>23</sup> The wedding took place in November and they decided to reside at Auchinleck. Used to the comforts of Edinburgh, Grizel was not prepared to put up with the old and dowdy furniture at Auchinleck. In 1801 a large order was placed with the fashionable Edinburgh upholsterers and cabinet makers, Young & Trotter, for new furniture. This included twenty-four rush bottomed chairs and six arm chairs of similar design, dressing glasses, a bow-fronted chest of mahogany drawers, two sofas, card and tea tables, beds and a mass of material presumably for new curtains and drapes. The whole order cost £232.<sup>24</sup>

Theirs was not solely a marriage of convenience; Grizel and Alexander shared common interests and she was an accomplished artist and engraver, but it was almost certainly her money he was after. He informed Forbes that 'it will be in my power to settle all my affairs by applying part of my Wife's fortune to that purpose'.<sup>25</sup> His wife's fortune and the death of Lady Auchinleck in 1799, to whom an annuity of £500 a year had been paid out

of the rental, now allowed him to launch a programme for improving the estate. From 1800 to 1812 Alexander spent £4,244 on building and repairing steadings, constructing dykes and planting hedges and thousands of trees.<sup>26</sup> John Paterson, an Edinburgh architect, who had for some time been rebuilding Eglinton castle near Irvine for the Earl of Eglinton, was engaged to put the house and stables in order.<sup>27</sup>