

The life of Thomas Coutts, banker ...

By Ernest Hartley Coleridge

CHAPTER V

(1767-1777)

FRIENDS AND CORRESPONDENTS

“Then with Scotland first begin.”—*Henry V.* 1. ii.

FOR the manner and events of the first thirty-five or forty years of the life of Thomas Coutts the documentary evidence is sparse and occasional. Letters may have been preserved which remain undiscovered or have not been placed at my disposal, but apart from the researches set on foot by Mr Richardson and others and continued for the purposes of this work, Sir William Forbes is, in reality, the chief and almost the sole source of information. From 1770 onwards there is a mass of material, for the most part unpublished. One of his principal correspondents was his cousin, Colonel John Walkinshaw Crawford of Crawfordland, in the county of Ayr. Born in 1721, he saw active service as an officer of the 115th Foot at Dettingen and Fontenoy, and, but for an honourable, but imprudent and untoward incident in his career, he was on the way to military preferment. He was a personal friend of the rebel general, Lord Kilmarnock, and from motives of friendship and loyalty attended him on the scaffold, and for this act of *lèse-majesté* he was placed at the bottom of the Army List. As time went on his offence was to some extent condoned, for in 1761 he was appointed “Falconer to the king” for Scotland; but in spite of many efforts on his own part, and interest made for him by Thomas Coutts, he does not seem to have received any command or to have regained the goodwill of the military authorities.

His mother, born Robina Walkinshaw, was daughter and heiress of John Walkinshaw of that ilk, and in right of his wife his father had added the name and arms of Walkinshaw to those of Crawford of Crawfordland. The unhappy Clementina Marie Sophie Walkinshaw, the mistress of Prince Charles Edward and mother of the Lady Charlotte Stuart, Duchess of Albany, was a distant connection, possibly fourth cousin of the Colonel. In her old age she corresponded with Thomas Coutts, and was for many years a pensioner on his bounty; and at the date of her first letter, which corresponds with the death of Colonel Crawford, it is possible that he may have regarded the relief of her necessities as a legacy from his friend. Of ancient lineage (he was said to be the twenty-second John Crawford in direct descent), Colonel Crawford was the last of his family, and on the strength of a comparatively close connection through the Kers of Morrieston, he proposed to settle the castle and estate of Crawfordland on Thomas Coutts. Contrary to his friend’s advice he put off making the settlement until it was too late. A deed was signed four days before his death, and as the statutory period of sixty days had not elapsed, and the grantor had not appeared in public, “at kirk or in the market-place,” after long litigation and an appeal to the House of Lords, it was finally decided (1806) that Crawfordland belonged to the heir-at-law, Miss Elizabeth Howison Crawford, and not to Thomas Coutts, or rather his daughter, Fanny, Marchioness of Bute, who was to have succeeded to the estate.

Apart from a Scotch cousinship, there may have been some early tie or some intimacy between the Colonel and the Stuarts of Allanbank which brought the two men together; or business relations, a sense of mutual obligation, may have cemented their union, but, from whatever cause, the rich and prosperous London banker conceived a warm, one might say a romantic affection for the impoverished laird, the owner of a ruined castle and a waste of "wat'ry acres." It is from his letters to Crawford that our knowledge of his thoughts and opinions on public and private incidents of the years 1775 to 1790 is principally derived.

Another source of information is the *Whitefoord Papers*, published by the Clarendon Press in 1898. The entire collection is now in the British Museum, and contains letters to and from the Coutts family not included in the volume edited by Professor W. S. A. Hewins. Caleb Whitefoord, natural son of Colonel Charles Whitefoord, the hero of a desperate but futile rally of the King's forces at the battle of Prestonpans,¹ was a contemporary of James Coutts and the lifelong friend of both brothers. They were not "schule-laddies" together, for Whitefoord was educated at James Mundell's Academy, but they knew each other at home. Caleb had been intended for the ministry, but his father, yielding to his son's objections, placed him in the counting-house of his friend Archibald Stewart, M.P. for Edinburgh, a wine-merchant settled in York Buildings, now reckoned as part of the "Adelphi." In 1753, soon after Tom Coutts came up to town, Colonel Whitefoord died, and Caleb entered into partnership with Thomas Brown, wine-merchant of Craven Street, Strand. Henceforward there was a close and intimate connection between the Coutts brothers and their neighbours Brown and Whitefoord. They shared the secrets of each others' business and of their home lives.

Caleb Whitefoord has his place in the history of his times and of his country. He may be described as the Corypheus of the "Wits." He had some vogue as the author of political squibs and *jeux d'esprit*, and as jester in ordinary to the *Morning Chronicle*; but only a character for sound good sense combined with a genius for good fellowship could have won him the acquaintance and friendship of such men as Adam Smith and Sir Joshua Reynolds, of Goldsmith and Smollett, of Foote and Garrick and Colman, or obtained for him the august approval of Dr Johnson. Partly from the accident of neighbourhood, he formed a close connection with Benjamin Franklin, who in 1757 lodged next door to him in Craven Street, a circumstance which long afterwards led to him being chosen as Secretary to the Commission which sat in Paris, 1782-1783, for arranging the Preliminary Treaty of Peace with the United States of America. He was one of those men who, without high birth or great talents or official rank, make their way to the front by a kind of native charm. They are popular schoolboys, clubbable men, and their popularity grows while they sleep. Their secret dies with them, and their posthumous fame rests on the testimony of those who have achieved fame for themselves. Caleb Whitefoord had the good fortune to suggest to Oliver Goldsmith a postscript to his immortal *Retaliation*.

"Here Whitefoord reclines, and deny it who can,
Though he merrily liv'd, he is now a grave man:
Rare compound of oddity, frolic and fun.
Who relish'd a joke, and rejoic'd in a pun;
Whose temper was generous, open, sincere;

¹ See *Tales of a Grandfather*, chap. xviii; *Prose Works*, Paris, 1830, vii. 817, and Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, 1837, i. 141.

A stranger to flatt'ry, a stranger to fear;
Who scatter'd around wit and humour at will.
Whose daily *bon mots* half a column might fill:
A Scotchman, from pride and from prejudice free;
A scholar, yet surely no pedant was he.
What pity, alas! that so lib'ral a mind
Should so long be to newspaper essays confin'd!
Who perhaps to the summit of science could soar,
Yet content 'if the table he set in a roar.'

Merry Whitefoord, farewell! for thy sake I admit
That a Scot may have humour, I had almost said wit.
This debt to thy mem'ry I cannot refuse,
'Thou best humour'd man with the worst humour'd muse.'"

But the Whitefoord who was the Governor of many literary feasts and "kept the table in a roar" was quite unknown to fame, when Tom Coutts determined on his own way of life and started house-keeping in St Martin's Lane with his niece's nursemaid for a bride. As the marriage took place on May 18, 1763, the following memorandum, dated 8th December 1763, points to a concealment of the fact on the part of the brothers:—

[AGREE]MENT.

Admiral Gordon, Rear Admiral of the White, President.

James Courts, Esqr., Banker.

Thomas Courts, Esqr., Ditto.

Thomas Brown, Wine Merchant, etc.

John Elliot,² Esqr., Captain of the Bellona.

Caleb Whitefoord, Secretary to the Society.

James Courts wagers with John Elliot, that he, the said John Elliot, shall be married before James Courts, Thomas Coutts, Caleb Whitefoord, or either of them: The amount of the wager is an entertainment to the above six persons and six of their friends—the loser to pay for the entertainment, and to make the winner a present of a horse, not under thi(rty) (paper torn) price.

Agreed Nem. con. (That the entertainment be given on Wednesday the 21st instant at the St Alban's Tavern in St Albans Street.

JAMES COUTTS.

J. ELLIOT.

Here we have a little colony of Scotsmen who at any rate enjoyed their own jokes. One of them, John Elliot, who fought at Cape St Vincent, served under Kempenfeldt and rose to be Admiral, was second cousin to James and Thomas Coutts, and hence, no doubt, his admission to the Club. Indeed, Whitefoord attempted to disabuse the public of a notion, strange to say

² John Elliot, third son of Sir Gilbert Elliot, Admiral of the Red, M.P. for Cockermonth, died 1809. "The capture by Commodore, afterwards Admiral, Elliot, of a privateering squadron under Thurot, was considered at the time to be a very brilliant exploit; and it had important results, inasmuch as it saved the town of Belfast from imminent destruction." *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot*, 1874, i. 23, Note 1.

still prevalent, that too large a share of “places of trust and profit” was engrossed by his countrymen. “Philo-Veritas,” as he signed himself, may have proved his point, but it is a fact that for many a long year Tom Coutts moved in a circle of “London Scottish,” emigrants like himself, and turned to them for society and support. The scene is the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, in St Martin’s Lane, but the *dramatis personæ* are North Britons. His landlord, Dr Maxwell Garthshore, was the son of an eminent Scottish minister. The Reverend John Calder, who was entrusted with the care of Patrick Coutts, was of Scottish origin. Archibald Stuart, son of Lord Provost Archibald Stuart, who was accused of betraying Edinburgh Castle to the Highland clans in 1746, a Scottish Member of Parliament, was settled in York Buildings, a stone’s-throw from the bank, and Caleb Whitefoord was close at hand in Craven Street. He was a seatholder of the Scottish National Church in Crown Court, Russell Street, and there, or privately in his own house, by the Presbyterian minister, his children were baptized.

A third correspondent, to whom Tom Coutts opens his mind on the political and financial questions of the day, was John Dalrymple, fifth Earl of Stair. The son of a Scottish Baron of Exchequer, grandson of the first earl, at one time Lord Justice-Clerk, he was called to the Scottish Bar, but afterwards obtained a commission as captain in the army. His uncle, the second Earl, Field-Marshal and Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Versailles, had nominated him his successor in the peerage, and on his death in 1747 he took his seat in the House of Lords as representative peer, and took part in the debates and voted; but a year later, owing to an adverse decision of the Committee of Privileges, he was disennobled and did not succeed to the family honours till the death of his cousin, the third, and his cousin’s son, the fourth Earl, in 1768. In 1771 he was again returned as a representative peer for Scotland, and made use of his position to uphold the cause of the American Colonies and to oppose measures designed to punish them for their resistance to the Home Government and bring them into submission. Parliament was dissolved, September 30, 1774, and, as might have been expected, Lord Stair was not re-elected as a representative peer. Thenceforth he devoted his energies to the publication of a series of pamphlets, in which he sought to open the eyes of the public to the actual state of national finance, and to urge the duty and necessity of economy. So gloomy and pessimistic were his forebodings, that according to Walpole (*A Catalogue of Royal and Honourable Authors*, 1806, v. 166, 167), he was nicknamed the “Cassandra of the State.” A Scottish nobleman of ancient lineage and high rank, he preaches doctrines which would try the faith of a Little Englander of the twentieth century. In one of his later pamphlets, *Advice and Expostulation with the People* (1784), his budget-making included such drastic measures as the duplication of the land tax and the cession of Canada and Gibraltar as expensive luxuries which the nation was unable to afford. It is needless to say that he prophesied to the winds and that only the pamphlets remain, a curious record of a forgotten personality, and illustrative mainly of what our ancestors used to call the “perfidium ingenium” of the despised and dreaded North Briton. He had married (*circ.* 1748) Margaret, daughter of George Middleton and niece of George Campbell, and in right of his wife at one time owned the lease of the bank premises in the Strand. Owing to this connection with his brother’s family (Lady Stair and Mrs James Coutts were first cousins), or because he respected him and sympathized with his pro-American views, Thomas Coutts played the part of London correspondent to the banished Lord, who seasoned his exile with the bitter sauce of a glowing but acrid rhetoric. From these three sources—the *Whitefoord Papers*, the letters to Colonel Crawford, and the letters to Lord Stair—we are able to trace the outline of the history of Tom Coutts from the dissolution of partnership in 1775 to his visit to the Continent in 1788.