A Wine-Merchant's Letter-Book

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In 1950 there was deposited in Her Majesty's Register House the letter-book of a firm of wine-merchants which carried on business in the town of Ayr during the early years of George III. It was in a very tattered and fragile condition and had lost one or two of its opening pages and portions of others; but on being repaired and rebound it could be thoroughly examined, and turned out to be of unusual interest. It covers only four and a half years, from the autumn of 1766 to the early months of 1771; but even in that brief period the business of the firm, Alexander Oliphant & Company, ranged from Stirlingshire to Barcelona, touched many social levels, and dealt with several other commodities besides wine.

The firm was founded in 1766, and the names of the eight partners were recorded some years later in a bond registered in the Books of Council and Session.1 Four of them, Alexander Oliphant himself, John Christian, George McCree, and Robert Whiteside, were merchants in Ayr; the other four were small lairds—Gilbert McAdam of Merkland, Dr. John Campbell of Wellwood, William Logan of Castlemains and David McClure of Shawwood. McCree and Christian shortly became landed proprietors also; for McCree, in 1770, bought Pitcon, in the parish of Dalry, from the last of the Boyds of that name; and Christian, in 1772, bought the little estate of Cunningpark, near the mouth of the Doon, from Captain Hew Whiteford Dalrymple.2 By 1774 no less than five of the eight partners were on the roll of parliamentary voters for Ayrshire, who at that time numbered only 128.

The group touches the circles of both Burns and Boswell. David McClure of Shawwood was the man who, as Burns admitted, "sat for the picture" of the harsh factor in The Twa Dogs,3 and Dr. Campbell was the brother-in-law of John Ranken or Rankine of Adamhill, to whom he wrote one of the most outspoken of his Epistles.4 Dr. Campbell also attended Mrs. Boswell in her last illness.4 Boswell knew Gilbert McAdam and many of his near relations.5 The firm’s customers, moreover, included several of Boswell’s acquaintance.

Although the beginning of the book has been destroyed by damp, it is clear that it began with the firm’s inauguration. On 24 October, 1766, a correspondent was told, "We have not yet engaged a wine cooper, and as our cellars are not finish’d and consequently our stock not laid in, we will not have occasion for one for a while." By early December, however, a cooper had been engaged, and the cellar was built—though actually above ground, and, says one letter, 'on a sand bank.' It was on sloping ground with an easy approach to its entrance from the harbour. It is still in use to-day, and still holds wine.

By the spring of 1767 business was already brisk. Alexander Oliphant and Company seem to have aimed at building up a connexion all over the south-west of Scotland. Before long they also had customers in the north of England, and through an agent in Greenock were exporting wine to the West Indies. But their main business evidently lay between Clyde and Solway. Besides their headquarters at Ayr, they had cellars of their own in Glasgow, Kilmarnock, Moffat and Stranraer. In 1770 they were negotiating for another in Lanark, and also writing detailed instructions to their agents in Greenock, Robert and Alexander Sinclair:

We hope you have got a good cellar to keep the wine in, so that it will be cool in summer and pretty warm in winter. You shou'd have catacombs in the cellar and the wine shou'd be pack'd on the side of the bottles with savings of timber.

It was probably due to the social standing of some of the partners that the firm seems to have built up very quickly an extremely promising connexion with many well-known families. Some of their customers were wealthy, and must have entertained on a large scale. One of the first was the Duke of Montrose. In October, 1766, his chamberlain was ordering on his behalf two hogsheads of claret; and three years later he ordered three hogsheads. The second consignment was ordered after the firm had sent six bottles of claret ‘for a tryal,’ with the message, ‘The wine we propose sending is very old and don’t doubt it will please his Grace’s taste.’ The six bottles were sent by Thomas Hunter, carrier, ‘with directions to leave it with the Buchanan carrier at Mr. John Scott’s in the new wynd in the Trongate, Glasgow.’

2. Paterson’s History of Ayrshire (1863), iii, 189; i, 142.
5. Ibid., vii. 122, 132; i, 57-60.
Lord Marchmont was another customer who, in September, 1767, was sent seventy-five dozen of claret and madeira; and William Muro of Caldwell, Baron of Exchequer, was another who liked to order his claret by the hoghead—" which," wrote Alexander Oliphant, 'we shall be careful in the choice of, and hope it will please your taste.' Another Baron of Exchequer, John Maule of Inverkeilor, formerly M.P. for Aberdeen burghs; Patrick Craufurd of Auchanances, a former member for Ayrshire; the Earls of Cassillis and Dumfries; and Sir Thomas Dunlop of Craigne, were other customers who had large accounts with Alexander Oliphant and Company. Sir John Cathcart of Killochman appears once, with an order for a tuncheon of rum.

Before the firm had been in existence for more than a few months, the partners decided to build a ship of their own in which to fetch their consignments of wine to Ayr. In April, 1767, they placed an order with an Ayr shipbuilder named John Fraser. The ship, a sloop of fifty tons, was built in the course of that summer and launched in October. She cost £600 and was named the Buck. It was fortunate that she was ready so soon, for in December the Company had news that the Nelly, Captain Brackenridge, on which they had apparently been depending hitherto for their cargoes from abroad, had run ashore in the West Indies, during a voyage from Madeira to Ayr by way of New York. She had had fifteen pipes of madeira on board consigned to Alexander Oliphant & Company, and they lost over £700 worth of goods in her and only recovered some £200 through insurance.

The Buck, however, which made her maiden voyage to Cadiz and Madeira in the spring of 1768, served her owners well. The skipper, after the first voyage, was one Captain William McRae, and he seems to have been conscientious and skilful. The letter-book contains copies of his sailing orders and also of the orders he carried with him to the company's agents in Madeira, Cadiz, Lisbon, Oporto, Barcelona, Bordeaux and Guernsey, from which a very fair idea can be had of the Buck's cargoes, and occasional glimpses of what sort of passages she had. Sixteen days was reckoned a good passage from Lisbon to Ayr.

The one misfortune the firm suffered through the Buck, as far as the letter-book's evidence shows, was the fault of neither the Company nor Captain McRae. It happened in the early summer of 1769. The Company heard from their agents at Oporto that their ship had been seized by the Portuguese customs authorities, as "some of the scoundrels of sailors" had been smuggling tobacco on board. The agents managed in a few days to get the ship cleared, but the sailors were detained in prison, and when the news got to Ayr the clamour of their relations round the office doors. They wrote to the agents asking if it would be of any use to raise a fund in Ayr for the men's release; but this plan apparently hung fire. The following February a letter repeats, 'The sailors' wives are very uneasy about their husbands.' In March the agents found means at last to get the men out of jail, having apparently worked equally well. It was not, however, until June that Alexander Oliphant & Company heard about it, and then they wrote:

We wish you could have let us know before the sailors we doubt it will not now be so easily got, however we will try what can be done.

The names of several other ships besides the Buck appear in the correspondence, such as the Peggy, the Hercules, the Greyhound, the Mally and the Flora. The two most picturesque of these names are the Seaflower and the Charming Molly, a brig from Bristol. One skipper bore a name that might have inspired Stevenson—that of Captain Hannibal Lucas.

The Flora, a Greenock brig, came to a sad end in the bay of Ayr on the 8th of December, 1770, and her fate is described in one of the longest letters in the book, written by Alexander Oliphant & Company to her owner, Mr. James Gammell.

We are extremely sorry to advise you of your brig Captain Francis's misfortune in being forc'd on shore here this morning in a hard gale of wind at north-west about 10 o'clock and about half-flood. The sea was so high that it was some time before any body could think of going off to her which a few sailors did at last. They got 3 seamen on shore but the captain, mate and boy refused quitting the vessel so that [they] continued from that time till about 4 o'clock in a very distress'd situation being almost constantly under water till the people on shore ventured again off with the boat and brought the captain and boy ashore but the mate was dead, occasion'd by fatigue and the severity of the weather. We are much afraid the brig will be loss'd as the cargo will be sav'd except what may be damaged by salt water. We shall do what lies in our power to preserve both ship and cargo and have employ'd some good hands to get what they can out of her this night as soon as the tide leaves her. We
apply'd to the captain for what letters or other papers he might have for you, but he says they are all on board in his chest and must be all wet. As soon as they can be got at he will get them dry'd.

The Company proved themselves good friends to the Flora's owner, arranging for a cooper to help in landing and securing the goods, 'also a sergeant's command to watch them and keep off all pilferers.' A fortnight later they offered advice against selling the wreck 'by public auction,' and recommended John Fraser, the builder of the Buck, if Mr. Gammell proposed building a new ship to replace the Flora, suggesting that in that case Fraser would probably give a price for what remained of her, which was apparently her dismasted hull.

To any historian of the Scottish wine trade Alexander Oliphant & Company's letter-book would certainly be of great value for its evidence of the kind of wines which were in favour in the age of Boswell. As might be expected, claret predominates; and it is interesting to read how such famous names of to-day as St. Julien, Cantenac and Margaux were equally esteemed then. Port and madeira were alike evidently popular. The Company ordered thirty pipes of port of the '67 vintage in November, 1768. White port, sherry, malaga, canary and various red Spanish and white Portuguese wines also figure among their orders, but burgundy very little, and champagne hardly at all. Nor does there seem to have been any demand for Rhine or Moselle wines, except for that favourite tipple of Boswell's, old hock. The Company ordered some old hock in July, 1768, through their agent in Guernsey, and two years later sent an order direct to an agent in Hamburg, as follows:

By the recommendation of our friend, Mr. Charles Fergusson in London, we use the freedom to apply to you for some old hock. He mentions that his house in Madeira propos'd sending a vessell to your place this season and hope this may yet overtake her with you. If so you'll please ship on board of her for our account one hundred doz. of old hock. We beg you'll send it good and address it to the care of Messrs. Fergusson and Murdoch in Madeira... Mr. Fergusson says they had some from you which was esteem'd very good.

A letter of a month later mentioned that the Company hoped to buy the old hock at two shillings a bottle, but were willing to go up to two and sixpence. This was quite a high price, for when the price of port went up to 18/- a dozen the Company reckoned it an 'extraordinary rise.' Port, sherry and malaga were all in much the same class as regards price, along with the light Spanish and Portuguese wines, which included 'Packarete, a pleasant sweet wine,' 'Mothuen, a light red wine,' and 'White Carcavella.' The expensive wines were madeira and claret; and the 'very old' claret sold to the Duke of Montrose was charged at £30 a hogshead, 'with bottles, corks and all other charges except carriage,' or £31 10/- inclusive. The Company's stock clarets were retailed in bottles at prices ranging from 46/- down to 30/- a dozen. These were high prices but of course the clarets for which they were charged were all vintage wines. The evidence of the letter-book need not be taken as disproving the well-known assertions of all the English travellers in eighteenth-century Scotland about the goodness and remarkable cheapness of claret in all the Scottish inns. Such wine was evidently of the non-vintage kind, as might be expected.

The Company did not deal much in spirits. They wrote to their Bordeaux agent in January, 1769, 'We find brandy will not do here'—the reason, presumably, being that smugglers could always undersell them. The Clyde coast from Fairlie to Girvan was notorious for the activity of smugglers. Once at least the Company ordered some arrack through their Lisbon agent. In whisky they did not deal at all. At this date it was not drunk in the Lowlands.

But the Buck carried a good many other things in her hold besides wine. The Company dabbled, at various times, in importing salt, fruit, grain, meat and silk. 'We do a great deal of business in the corn trade,' they wrote in 1770. Occasionally they seem even to have charted the Buck to other firms for short voyages: thus in November, 1769, she was carrying a cargo of lead from Creetown to Dublin—it had probably come down on packhorses from the old minea at Wanlockhead. Once they sent the Buck out to Lisbon ballasted with coal, 'which,' they told their agent, 'please sell and credit us the proceeds.' She seldom returned from abroad without various interesting goods stowed among the wine-barrels. One special order to the Bordeaux agent in December, 1769, was for burgundy, champagne, 'the oldest and best claret that can be got,' cork-wood, vinegar, olives, oil, silk gloves and mitteus, anchovies and 'St. Catherine's prunes.' And in September, 1770, when Captain McRae sailed for Cadiz, with orders to load wine, cork-wood—'as much cork-wood as will stow the cargo'—lemons, sweet and bitter oranges, and raisins of the sun...
or sultanas, he carried also with him this curious request to the Cadiz agent:—

Please send as much strip’d lutestring as will make a gown for a lusty woman. We suppose Cadiz is a good place for buying silk.

The letter-book naturally contains many orders for the essentials of a wine-merchant’s business: cork-wood, bottles, and wax for sealing the corks.—red, green, black and yellow. Bottles gave the Company a good deal of trouble. They got them first in Glasgow, but their cooper complained that the Glasgow manufacturer made the mouths so large that ‘there is no getting corks large enough to stop them.’ They next tried a firm in Bristol, from which they ordered 100 gross for a tryal, to be sent in the brig the Charming Molly; and then three Liverpool firms in turn. None of these manufacturers seems to have been dependable enough to supply bottles of the exact shapes and sizes asked; and Alexander Oliphant & Company had in particular great difficulty in getting their favourite size of bottles—‘long thirteens.’ ‘What we mean by 13’s,’ they wrote to the Bristol firm, ‘is 13 bottles to hold 3 gallons, but those you sent us are all quarts.’

They had other difficulties too. In 1770 there was an appearance in Galloway and Carrick of forged banknotes, the first of which reached the Company in a remittance from their agent in Stranraer. Some customers, again, were very slow in paying their accounts. Sir Thomas Wallace of Craigie at one time owed the Company over £70,7 and Lord Dumfries over £125.

Some other troubles were probably due to the partners’ inexperience in the wine trade. Despite constantly telling their agents abroad, ‘We must have the best. . . . We depend on your care in choosing the wine. . . . We beg you’ll send good wine. You must know how material it is to have our wines of equal quality to our neighbours,’ they seem to have been several times badly or dishonestly served. Lord Cassillis, Baron Mure, Baron Maule and Patrick Craufurd of Auchenames all complained about the quality of certain clarets supplied to them. Some at least of this wine must have come through the Belfast agent with whom the Company had dealt in their early months, and to whom they complained in August, 1768, that of the last two consignments from Belfast most of the bottles were ‘prick’d,’ and the rest ‘very ill tasted.’ To some of their customers Alexander Oliphant & Company apologized, and took the bad wine back; but to Mr. Craufurd of Auchenames they protested:

We are convince’d that if the wine had been used in time it would have pleas’d well, but it is loss’d merely by being too long kept for wine of that body. It was in very good order for drinking when we sent it away. . . . It was exceeding well lik’d and much in demand.

A month later they took back two dozen of claret from Baron Maule, declaring at the same time, ‘It is the only wine ever we took back, but what was sold in bottles and seal’d with our own seal and return’d so.’

But the main cause of the Company’s ultimate downfall seems to have been simply bad financial management. They had their fingers in too many pies, and from the very beginning seem to have been carrying a large load of debt, increased, perhaps, by the loss of the Nelly and the building of the Buck. Before the Company was two years old it was risking its credit in other ventures. A letter of April, 1768, says, ‘We are now considerably in advance for the cost of the grain got from Ireland and little money coming in.’ A few months later the partners describe themselves as ‘disappointed in some sums we thought to receive,’ and negotiating with Mr. John Bushby in Dumfries for a loan of £3,000 ‘on the joint security of our whole Company.’ Early in 1770 they were uneasy about the import duty they were having to pay on French wine, their principal stock-in-trade, and toying with a subterfuge for avoiding it. This is revealed in a letter to their agent in Barcelona:

Pray is it practicable to import wine into your place from the south of France . . . and if so what duty or other charges on it with you and could that wine be ship’d again with you for Brittain as Spanish wine by this manner to save the extravagant high duty which those kind of French wines will not bear? If this could be done it must be unknown to the captain of the vessell who takes it. . . . Pray let this be between ourselves. . . .

They were nervous in November, 1770, about the risk of sending the Buck to Portugal in view of the possibility of ‘a rupture’ with France, though hoping there would not be ‘a warr for some time.’ But the mortal wound was received three years later through the failure of Douglas, Heron & Company’s bank, which closed its doors, after a spectacular
The bank, like the wine company, was an Ayr venture which had spread its activities over a good deal of the south-west of Scotland; and its collapse involved in its ruin a large number of west country lairds and many small business firms. Alexander Oliphant & Company were only one of a variety of enterprising companies engaged in different kinds of foreign and domestic trade... all of them closely connected or linked together and all of them partners of Douglas, Heron & Company."8 When the bank failed, Alexander Oliphant & Company could not hope to carry on.

The partners suffered individually. John Christian had to raise money by a bond on his newly acquired estate of Cunningpark, which was sold a few years later at the instance of the bank's creditors. Dr. Campbell of Wellwood was 'stripped of nearly all he possessed' and was obliged to sell his family estate.9 So was Gilbert McAdam, who on his death in 1788 left many debts and no assets but a gold watch.10 McClure of Shawwood was in financial difficulties in 1783 when he was pressing Robert Burns's father for the arrears of the rent of Lochlie.11 None the less, the firm seem to have carried on for a while. In 1774 they were borrowing the sum of £1,100 from Archibald Craufurd of Ardmillan.12 But that seems to have been their last effort, and their affairs were shortly in the hands of trustees for the benefit of their creditors, Ardmillan being one of the trustees.13 They must have given up business soon afterwards, but their stock and goodwill were evidently bought by another wine-merchant, for their premises, like their letter-book, ultimately came into the possession of the latter, and still flourishing, firm of wine-merchants who presented this record of their predecessors' activities to the Scottish Record Office.

9. Ibid., pp. 143, 612.