

## COMMODORE SIR JOHN DUTTON CLERK OF PENICUIK, 10<sup>th</sup> Baronet

Sir John Clerk, who died on 25 October 2002, was not himself a scholar. A modest, kindly and humorous man, he would have been the first to admit this. He did not shine at school (he was sent to Stowe under its remarkable headmaster, the Edinburgh-born J. F. Roxburgh, where he was a contemporary of the young second Earl Haig), and he never attended university. Instead he went to work, effectively as an office-boy, for a Leith grain merchant, commuting by train to his daily grind (figuratively if not quite literally) from the family's house in North Berwick. Sea-side living and Leith working must have instilled in him that ancestral love of the sea which had directed the lives of forebears who had served in the Royal Navy and of his great kinsman, John Clerk of Eldin, who had devised the naval tactics of the Navy of Rodney and Nelson and whose famous theoretical manoeuvre of 'breaking the line' had contributed in no small degree to the winning of battles from Dominica to Trafalgar. John Clerk took great pride in his family's naval connections, and loved to show visitors to Penicuik House the small cork and wax models of ships (they resemble nothing so much as desiccated cocktail sausages) which are alleged to have been those with which the land-lubber Clerk of Eldin worked out his theories on paper and with which he experimented on the High Pond of Penicuik and the canal at Mavisbank.

In 1938, and in the shadow of war, Clerk was saved from office tedium by the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. On being commissioned he specialised in gunnery, and it was as a gunnery officer that he served in the battle cruiser HMS *Repulse*. He had the good fortune to be seconded as a gunnery instructor to the South African Navy and thus escaped (as so many of his comrades did not) the sinking of that ship along with the *Prince of Wales* off Malaya in 1941. He served subsequently in the Far East and North Atlantic, and was due to go again to the Far East theatre when the Japanese surrender brought to an end his active naval career. After the war he was an enthusiastic RNR officer, and was successively Captain of the Forth Division and Commodore of the naval reserve forces of the UK. For his services he was awarded the Volunteer Reserve Decoration and was appointed CBE in 1966. He was a member of the Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland, the Royal Company of Archers, and rose through the somewhat topsy-turvy ranks of that body as Brigadier, Ensign and finally as Lieutenant. For twenty years he was Lord-Lieutenant of Midlothian, and represented the Crown in his county not only with distinction and diligence but with a remarkable ability to appeal to all sections of the community in towns and mining villages where gentlemen and landowners might not always be welcomed. His popularity was matched by the charm of his wife Elizabeth. Clerk took his many and varied duties seriously and revelled in the high moments such as his receiving the Pope on the Scottish visit of 1982. A few days after that meeting the present writer (a frequent visitor) happened to be at Penicuik on some occasion or other. The Lord-Lieutenant offered his hand, with the invitation to 'shake it and get the goodness': he claimed not to have washed since His Holiness had pressed the flesh earlier in the week!

John Clerk may not have been a scholar in his own right, but he was a great friend to all the countless students and scholars who came to Penicuik in pursuit of their research, or the much greater numbers who used the family papers for many different ends. He was heir to a great tradition of scholarship and scientific enterprise, of taste and talent which extended in an unbroken line through the main and cadet branches of the family from the 1630s to the mid-Victorian period. Few Scottish or indeed British families can match this tradition of inherited cultural and scientific eminence, not simply as patrons (the recognisers of talent in others) but also as practitioners themselves. Antiquarianism, art-collecting, architecture, landscape gardening, music and poetry were the Clerks' cultural preserves; geology, mechanics, mining technology, medicine, theoretical physics and astronomy, were the parallel scientific fields in which they achieved competence, eminence or supreme distinction. Sir John was hugely and rightly proud to be a kinsman of Clerk of Eldin, who had worked with James Hutton on the illustrations for the fundamental *Theory of the Earth*, and to hold, revered within the wider family circle of learning and achievement, the towering genius of James Clerk Maxwell. He was likewise proud of the Napier of Merchiston and Drummond of Hawthornden blood in his veins, and could show the ivory 'Napier's Bones' of the one and the Ben Johnson correspondence of the other. If his circumstances had been different he himself might well have been an engineer. As things were, he took great pleasure in his fine ancestral clocks, and in the trips to North America and to Hawaii that the Clerk Maxwell connection and his own astronomical and navigational interests offered him. Country life and country pursuits, natural history, gardening and the maintenance of his estate (to which he had succeeded in 1943) with all its historic landscape features were among his relaxations.

No-one who has worked in any of the fields, artistic or scientific, in which the Clerks were protagonists can ever forget the kindness and 'hospitality to the mind' (the phrase of that of the antiquary Alexander Gordon, applied to the second baronet in the 1720s) extended by Sir John and Lady Clerk. Scholars all over the world owe these kindest and most generous of owners of historic collections the most profound gratitude. The Clerk Collection of paintings, drawings and works of art is remarkable and of great interest; but the family muniments are of even

greater significance, and it is this archive, astonishing in its range and completeness, that has been for some sixty years a source of prime importance to scholars in many disciplines. After the war Clerk (now living in the quaint elegance and captivating charm of the Palladian stable block) began to look into his family papers that had by luck survived the fire of 1899 which had destroyed Penicuik House. Professor Stuart Piggott, pursuing his own antiquarian research, came to inspect the charter room, and realised that there was a vast treasure-trove ripe for exploitation. The muniments were deposited in General Register House, where they still remain among the most heavily used of the Gifts and Deposits series. Of all the countless discoveries made in the archive, that of the hundreds of letters of Robert Adam written to his family from Italy in the 1750s stands out as perhaps the most significant. The lost drawings for Hutton's seminal work on geology are another discovery of world importance. Access to all this was freely given by Sir John, who took great delight in the findings of those to whom he gave so much generous encouragement. In several cases the initial enquiry by young student or by established scholar was to lead to years of happy personal friendship and close involvement with a delightful family circle. Walter Scott, reminiscing of his own youth, spoke for many in subsequent generations when he praised the topographical and artistic pleasures of Penicuik and, 'overwhelmed with kindness', of the 'flattering hospitality of the owners'.

John Clerk's generosity to scholars was legendary, and the many acknowledgements in the published works of others stand as testimony to this most valuable if indirect contribution to the cultural and scholarly life of Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century. The papers, and their kind and patient owner, have certainly underpinned a very large amount of scholarly work undertaken in Scotland and furth of the realm. The present writer knows more than most what this support and friendship meant. One has to think only of the Robert Adam exhibitions of 1978 and 1992 when the entire enterprise on both occasions was founded very largely upon the remarkable resources of the Clerk muniments. Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh was a wholly appropriate accolade for Clerk to have received from the scientific and academic communities. He used to appear in the list of Fellows published in *The World of Learning* as 'Antiquary', a conscious echo of the virtuoso outlook of the second baronet who was among the founders of the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, predecessor of the Royal Society.

Sir John Clerk made possible much of the research and writing of others. But he was also, and much more important, quite simply a good man. As the Provost of St Mary's, paraphrasing Chaucer, said at the memorial service (a characteristic Clerk occasion combining the Navy hymn with an ancestor's music played by young members of the family, and with moving contemplative moments followed by a gigantic drinks party filling the Cathedral with gossip and laughter) the tenth baronet of Penicuik was truly 'a very perfect gentle knight'.

**Iain Gordon Brown**

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