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WITH LAUREL LADEN HOME: ENTERTAINING ROBERT ADAM IN ITALY

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That the Adams were, as Alexander Carlyle put it, a “wonderfully loving family”,¹ has long been evident from the extensive collection of letters written by Robert and James from Italy which has come down to us to tell of their ambition, their hopes, their enthusiasms, their social and intellectual progress in the world – developments which they vouchsafed to their mother and siblings who were clearly their intimates, their supporters, their confidantes and their sounding-boards. On one occasion Robert, writing from Rome, referred to the family gathered together in Edinburgh, on whom he depended for epistolary companionship in a foreign land, moral support and comfort at long distance, as “a Council & Quorum of wise & considerate Friends”.² Even before his departure from Scotland, Robert had appeared to place great importance upon a family correspondence through the coming years. He mentioned to his mother the need for his younger brother William – the baby of the family – to prepare himself for the writing of “gentlemanly letters to the southern climate of Italy, in which place the Adamians’ names will be read with joy.”³

To the good fortune of posterity, the Adam family back in Edinburgh preserved the Italian letters of Robert and James, almost as talismans against the day when the brilliant brothers would – to use a phrase in one of Robert’s letters describing the hoped-for end of a projected Greek and Levantine expedition in search of Classical monuments⁴ – return home “laden with laurel” and take their rightful place at the head of the British architectural profession.

For his part, Robert was less scrupulous about preserving the family letters which he received in Italy. We have some idea of the subjects covered in these, for Adam often alluded in his own letters to topics mentioned by his sisters, or fixed upon an item of gossip they had raised and added his own gloss or asked for further information. (James shared his brother’s enjoyment of letters from home, wherever they were: in a letter from London in 1758, for example, James wrote of how he and Bob relished “the pleasure of our Edinr. Intelligence.”⁵ The family circle was “our little Society”.⁶ But the letters themselves Robert disposed of, the earlier ones in an orgy of destruction during his journey in the autumn of 1755 through Umbria towards the “Hadriatick Shoar”: he reread them as he sat in his postchaise and tore them in pieces “so that many miles were strewed with the fragments”.⁷ Yet the fact that these letters were a consolation and a lifeline is not in doubt. “You are the finest writing bodys in the world”, he told his sister Betty, “& I have no fault to find with you at all, but that you are at too great a distance. It is impossible to give you as much of thanks as you deserve; but [it] is to be hoped the time will come when we shall beslaver our gabs with friendly spittle & whinge out a greet of joy.”⁸

Much of the Adam correspondence had a light and whimsical tone, especially (it would appear) the letters which went from Edinburgh to the brothers during their Italian sojourns. This must have provided a perfect foil for the brothers’ own accounts of their hobnobbing in the high society of Florence and Rome, and a healthy antidote to the delusions of grandeur which must have so threatened – as the family doubtless imagined – the plain Scottish commonsense of the travellers. Letters from home helped to restore the equilibrium. Of

his reaction to receiving while in Venice a communication from James, Robert wrote to their sister Peggy: “as soon as the lump of feeling was gulp’d down I drew forth my letter a second time, & read to the end”.⁹ Such letters, intended for the “diversion & amusement” of each other, assisted their search for “mutual happyness”.¹⁰ Several contained poems or jingles written to entertain Robert in Italy. These he seems to have appreciated. “Write me poems & stuff,” he told Peggy; “I like it immensely”.¹¹ During the last weeks of 1756 and in the early days of 1757, for example, Robert’s letters are full of allusions to a mock-epic of Betty’s composition on the subject of “The Louse”. Other verses on the same theme followed from the pens of different Adams. “I like it vastly . . . I hope nevertheless that it won’t stand in the way of Meggy’s Louse running this length. For in this country of vermin I should enjoy reading it with double gusto – woud nab it with infinite pleasure & crack many a good joke by its means in after letters.”¹² There are references, too, to further poems, the work of James and some of the other sisters, being sent to him.¹³

A notebook containing transcripts of these poems has recently been identified among the Clerk of Penicuik papers in the Scottish Record Office.¹⁴ The connection with Robert Adam had not before been appreciated, for the small volume was not grouped with the other Adam material in that great archive, and nothing suggested that a relationship was to be expected. Nevertheless, the notebook (or more properly a gathering of sheets stitched together) is indeed in the hand of Robert Adam and the contents, which at first sight seem to be nothing more than a collection of amateur verses, are in fact transcripts by him of poems included in letters sent to him from home. Only a careful reading of the family correspondence indicates the significance and status of the otherwise anonymous verses. The names of Robert and his relations nowhere occur on the pages.

Of these poems, one in particular is of special interest, It is published here for the first time, along with a previously unpublished sketch of the Adam family gathered in the garden of John Adam’s house at North Merchiston (Fig. 1), which was discovered at Penicuik House.



Fig. 1. The Adam family gathered in John Adam’s garden at North Merchiston.

One may imagine them grouped round a table for a reading of one of Bob's letters from Rome. "To the Bee by an Architect" is perhaps the work of James Adam; but it was at any event sent out to Robert to entertain him as, like the bee, he gathered nectar in the form of knowledge of the varied antiquities of Italy, and laid up a store of architectural motifs and decorative forms in the hive of his mind. The poem was written (and is so to be understood) in the context of Robert's activities in Italy, of his encounter with Antiquity at first hand, of his reports of the effect this had upon his taste and on his potential for advancement as he had conveyed that to his family in his letters, and in the spirit of excitement with which his homecoming was awaited. The last line surely echoes Robert's own words on his projected "return home laden with laurel". As such, this is a discovery singularly appropriate to the bicentenary year that has seen much re-evaluation of Robert Adam's life and achievement, so great a part of which was built upon his years in Rome.

To the Bee by an Architect

1.

Illustrious Artist, freedom's child,
Lay thy poison'd dart aside
Nor wound thy friend, thy brother spare,
Thy brother in immortal art.

2.

Alike the friend of freedom's cause
I range luxurious Nature's store,
Alike collect her varied sweets,
And cull & mix them for mankind.

3.

Sweet skilful Architect forbear
To wound thy brother builder's hand,
Which like to thine the fabrick forms
The curious cave & vaulted dome.

4.

Like thee I play, like thee I sing,
Like thee I sport in Phoebus' beams,
Like thee industrious pass the day,
And come with laurel laden home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The poem and other extracts from the Adam letters in his possession are quoted, and the illustration reproduced, by kind permission of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Bt.

NOTES

1. John Fleming, *Robert Adam and his Circle in Edinburgh and Rome*, London, 1962, 100.

2. Iain Gordon Brown, *Monumental Reputation: Robert Adam and the Emperor's Palace*, Edinburgh, 1992, 31.
3. Scottish Record Office [SRO], Clerk of Penicuik Muniments, GD18/4744, Robert Adam to Mrs Mary Adam, August 11, 1754.
4. SRO, GD18/4833, Robert Adam to Jenny Adam, March 30, 1757.
5. SRO, GD18/4847, James Adam to Nelly Adam, February 1, 1758.
6. SRO, GD18/4877, James Adam to Betty Adam, November 25, 1760.
7. Fleming, 1962, 182.
8. SRO, GD18/4802, March 20, 1756.
9. SRO, GD18/4840, July 6, 1757.
10. SRO, GD18/4835, Robert Adam to Betty Adam, April 24, 1757.
11. SRO, GD18/4825, November 13, 1756.
12. SRO, GD18/4828, Robert Adam to Betty Adam, December 25, 1756.
13. SRO, GD18/4827, Robert Adam to Betty Adam, December 18, 1756; /4828, to Betty, December 25, 1756; /4830, to Peggy, January 14, 1757.
14. SRO, GD18/4449.