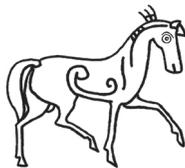


A LETTER FROM A  
KIRKCUDBRIGHT GROCER,  
1814

Edited by  
Peter Didsbury



THE EUROPEAN  
ETHNOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH CENTRE

Sources in Local History

## INTRODUCTION

This letter, in the present editor's private collection, is from James Caven, presumably the individual of the same name who is listed a decade later in *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6* as a grocer, spirit dealer and ship's chandler in Kirkcudbright's High Street.<sup>1</sup> He may be the same person as the James Caven (or Cavan) who became a burghess of Kirkcudbright in 1821.<sup>2</sup> Against this identification is the fact that burghess status was necessary in order to be allowed to conduct a trade in the burgh, something Caven was clearly already doing. It is possible, however, that the requirement may not have been strictly enforced at this period. Whatever the case, he is not necessarily the same James Caven (Cavan) who is buried in St Cuthbert's cemetery (Kirkcudbright kirkyard), and whose headstone records that he died in 1848 at the age of fifty-six. That individual would have been twenty-two years old at the time of this letter.

The letter consists of a single sheet of Pott-size paper (318 mm x 381 mm), folded after the fashion of the time to afford three internal pages for writing. The exterior bears the three-line 'mileage' postmark of Castle Douglas in black ink in a rectangular frame. It is addressed to:

Mr John Brown  
Messrs [?W:] & J: Balieffs  
Hatters  
Dumfries.

It is evident that Brown had been known to Caven in Kirkcudbright's mercantile community, before leaving the town to take up a position in Dumfries. William M'Dowell noted that 'the name of Balieff was closely

identified' with the once flourishing hat-making trade in Dumfries, and that in the burgh's kirkyard 'a flat slab bears in remembrance John Balieff, first of the name, died 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1800, aged 67 ...'.<sup>3</sup> Pigot's directory of 1825-26 lists two Balieff hatter businesses in Dumfries: Joseph Balieff at 123 High Street, and William Balieff & Son at 21 David Street and 22 High Street.<sup>4</sup>

Comprising gossip, commercial and social intelligence, and conventional piety, the letter affects a more elevated linguistic register than we might now think appropriate to the subject matter; it affords, nevertheless, an interesting insight into the milieu of a small-town tradesman in south-west Scotland two hundred years ago.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, London and Manchester, n.d., 449. The Pigot directory is one of two sources which have proved particularly useful in identifying some of the persons mentioned in the letter, the other being the parochial visitation lists compiled by the Reverend Dr Robert Muter. See Macleod, I F, ed. *The People of Kirkcudbright in 1786 and 1788: The Visitation Lists of the Rev. Robert Muter*, Kirkcudbright, 2002. Although these lists are a generation earlier than Caven's letter, they were added to by various individuals in later years, most notably the Reverend John Underwood, parish minister from 1843 until 1878. Underwood disassembled the original notebook containing the lists and added considerable supplementary information as interleaved text, some of which is drawn upon here. It should be noted, however, that no exhaustive attempt has been made to identify every individual mentioned and that the writer would be pleased to receive any further information or corrections.

<sup>2</sup> As suggested by Dr David Devereux (personal communication).

<sup>3</sup> M'Dowall, W. *Memorials of St Michaels: The Old Parish Churchyard of Dumfries*, Edinburgh, 1876, 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, 321.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

In preparing the letter for publication, the original spelling has been retained, but punctuation has been amended where necessary for purposes of clarity. The original makes much use of abbreviations, many of them superscript, in dates, place names, and personal names and titles; these have been silently expanded and brought into line with normal modern usage. Words that are unclear in the original text and have been transcribed tentatively appear as [?]. Other editorial interventions and comments have been inserted in [ ].

The editor is grateful for the generous help and guidance of Dr David Devereux, formerly curator of the Stewartry Museum, Kirkcudbright.

The front cover illustration shows Kirkcudbright in 1816, as drawn by William Daniell (©Trustees of the British Museum, BM1869, 0410.1214).

## THE LETTER

Kirkcudbright 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1814

Dear Sir

Your correspondents Messrs MacMillan & [?]yson presented me your kind respects from whom I also learned of your change of situation, which I hope will prove more lucrative and ultimately redound to your advantage. In giving any of my acquaintances the provincial news, I am on all occasions found greatly deficient, from me therefore you need not expect a correct narrative. I trust however you are more the man of honor [*sic*] than to expose my insipid productions.

Since the departure of my worthy companion Mr G. Conning<sup>[1]</sup> to Leith, which took place on the 9<sup>th</sup> April and of which you have no doubt been informed, I have had no associates, and I assure you his unexpected and sudden exit has by me been seriously felt; he is truly a very promising young man and will I am convinced get quick promotion. D. Sharp is returned from Edinburgh and is now a little proud and selfish. Young Cavet, I hear, goes to Dr Shand.<sup>[2]</sup> Captain Anthony Conning<sup>[3]</sup> is some weeks ago married to Jean Wilson, as also Captain William Armstrong to Mrs Lightman, who is now in her 6<sup>th</sup> month. I was a guest at the former occasion, which was a very hearty wedding. Mr Hamleton [*sic*] has a large Dancing School and Blair<sup>[4]</sup> a Singing School but about these professors and their pupils I can say nothing, being quite ignorant of both these polite accomplishments.

At our last Fair,<sup>[5]</sup> nothing particular occurred; your Old Master Mr Sproat<sup>[6]</sup> was selling what Goods he had left by Auction. Thomas Sproat is now with Mr [?McClune] as also a nother [*sic*] Boy from the Bridge of Dee – young Thomson having gone off to the West Indies.

I have heard that the Bonny young Girl who you accompanied as far as Tongueland Bridge<sup>[7]</sup> about a year ago (which I am sure you will not have

forgot), died in Child Bed – and it was said that **W. Mc. M\_\_\_\_\_s** was the Father.

Pray when will you be in Kirkcudbright and when do you intend becoming your own Master? Annexed you have the names of those persons who have recently died in this Town and Neighbourhood, which will farther evince you of our transitory and uncertain state here.

Write me all news at your first convenience, trusting you will excuse brevity and not having to add, I remain

My Dear Sir,  
Your Sincere  
Wellwisher  
James Caven

#### Deaths

Miss Campbell	}	all aged
Elizabeth Black		
John Lindsay		
Mrs Mills		
Mrs McMorries		
John Thompson Milburn <sup>[8]</sup>	}	

John Taylor's Wife very suddenly

Mr Thomas Sproat of Brighthouse<sup>[9]</sup>

Mrs Brown, alias Miss Grace Gordon

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> An interleaved addition to the Reverend Muter's visitation list for 1786 records that a certain John Conning and his wife had numerous offspring, including a son George, who worked in the custom house and afterwards 'transferred to Leith & Montrose'. See Macleod, 2002, 39. Dr David Devereux suggests (personal communication) that this is the individual referred to here.

<sup>2</sup> Pigot lists J S Shand as a physician and surgeon in the High Street. He was also, at this time, a member of the town's 'common council', *i.e.* he was an ordinary elected member of the burgh council, not an office holder. An interleaved note in the Reverend Muter's aforementioned visitation list for 1786 records that Dr Walker was the principal medical man in Kirkcudbright and that in 1809 or 1810 Dr John Sanders Shand M.D. came down from Edinburgh to be his assistant. See Macleod, 2002, 43; and *Pigot & Co's New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, 449.

<sup>3</sup> An Anthony Conning was master and owner of the Kirkcudbright-registered smack *Skeldon* in 1826.

<sup>4</sup> Dr David Devereux suggests (personal communication) that this is possibly David Blair (*c.*1773-1861), who was precentor in the church for about fifty years. The Reverend Muter's visitation list for 1786 records that 'David was a shoemaker, but dropped the trade – worked in the woods at one time, and afterwards in gardens – had a fine voice, but not a good ear it was said – had not Science' (Macleod, 2002, 47).

<sup>5</sup> Fairs were held on 12 August, or on the Friday following, and 29 September, or on the Friday following. See *Pigot & Co's New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, 447. Brown had clearly left Kirkcudbright some months before the date of this letter.

<sup>6</sup> Dr David Devereux informs me (personal communication) that John Brown is described in the burgh court records as an apprentice of Thomas Sproat, evidently the 'your Old Master' referred to in the letter. See Stewartry Museum, 0800/304/01, Burgh Court Records, 19 February 1809. He seems to have been in some financial difficulties around this time. Pigot lists a Thomas Sproat as a grocer and spirit dealer (who also dealt in hardware) in the High Street, and it is possible that this person is to be identified with the, apparently younger, individual who is mentioned in the next sentence as being 'now with Mr [?McLune]'. See *Pigot & Co's New Commercial*

*Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, 449. The name Sproat was locally common.

<sup>7</sup> On the Dee, two miles above the town.

<sup>8</sup> Uniformly 'Mill Bourne' in Pigot, but 'Mill Burn' according to the Ordnance Survey. Also modern Millburn Street. Kirkcudbright Old Mill, for grain, was located on the north side of the stream. There were two Thomsons listed in Pigot as being of Mill Bourne in 1825-26, namely Robert, a cabinet maker, and John, a tanner. See *Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6*, 448 and 449. These may be related to the individual mentioned here, despite the difference in spelling.

<sup>9</sup> The farm at Brighthouse, near Borgue, appears to have been in the possession of a family called Sproat since at least the late seventeenth century: 'in [the valuation roll] of 1682 we find Thomas Sproat, owner of Brighthouse ...' (M'Kerlie, P H. *History of the Lands and their Owners in Galloway*, 3 vols, Edinburgh, 1877-79, III, 222).