

An Unrecorded Smollett Letter

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IN HIS recent edition of *The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, Oxford, 1970, Professor Lewis M. Knapp expresses the wish 'of all students of Smollett that eventually more of his correspondence will be found'. Among papers given to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, by Ralph Griffin, F.S.A., in December 1922, there is a single autograph letter to an unknown correspondent, dated Leghorn, 9 January 1771.¹ Knapp publishes one complete letter to Alexander Telfer of Symington (Letter 105) and an extract from a letter to John Hunter (Letter 106), both addressed from Leghorn and bearing the same date.

The new letter shares a number of similarities with Letter 105. Both are letters of recommendation in favour of a young Scottish surgeon, Mr Cochrane, who unfortunately remains unidentified.² Smollett seems to have furnished Cochrane with letters to several friends, including Dr William Pitcairn (1711-1791), physician to St Bartholomew's Hospital, though no correspondence between Smollett and Pitcairn has turned up. As in his letter to Alexander Telfer, Smollett mentions that Cochrane came to Leghorn with Sir David Murray, who died shortly after their arrival.

The letter published here is written to one of Smollett's medical friends in London, probably to a Scotsman. As there is no address on the letter, which was presumably delivered by Cochrane, any attempt to identify the correspondent must remain conjectural, until fresh facts are uncovered. An index card in the Fitzwilliam

¹ I wish to thank the Director and Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum for permission to publish the new letter.

² There is not sufficient evidence to connect him with Thomas Cochrane, whose 'Notes from Doctor [Joseph] Black's Lectures on Chemistry 1767/8' were recently printed for private circulation by ICI, ed. Douglas Mckie, Cheshire, 1966. Thomas Cochrane studied medicine at Edinburgh University from 1766 to 1769, but did not proceed to the M.D. In 1770, he was entered as a surgeon at the Royal College of Surgeons of Scotland, and appears to have practised at Penicuik, south of Edinburgh. There is no record of his activities between 1770 and 1771.

Library suggests that the letter might have been to Dr John Hunter. This identification, though attractive, seems improbable if we are to believe the traditional attribution of the fragmentary Letter 106, bearing the same date, as written to John Hunter. It is also unlikely that it was addressed to John's elder brother, Dr William Hunter, a close friend of long standing.¹ Among Smollett's other influential medical friends in London to whom he could have written such a letter of recommendation are Dr Alexander Reid (1719-1789), assistant surgeon at the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, and Dr Thomas Dickson (c. 1727-1784), physician at the London Hospital. It is possible that one of these was Smollett's correspondent. However, as it stands, the evidence is far from conclusive.

The following is the text of the letter:

Dear Doctor

Since I settled in this country, I have been visited by several Individuals of your acquaintance, in their way to the interior parts of Italy; but, by none of them did you favour me with Letter, or Token, Message or Memorial; & these instances of neglect I number among your Sins of omission, for which, however, I now give you an opportunity of making atonement.

Give me leave to introduce to your acquaintance the Bearer Mr Cochrane a young Surgeon from Edinburgh, who has been some months at Leghorne, where he is much respected by the Gentlemen of the English Factory.² He came hither with Sir David Murray³ who died in the last stage of a Consumption, a few days after his arrival. Mr Cochrane is going home to Scotland, and having a great curiosity to see some of the London Hospitals, I have given him a Letter to our friend Pitcairn, over and above this memorandum in which I recom-

¹ Smollett complains that he has not received any news from his correspondent since his arrival in Italy. Although no letters are extant from this period, one can hardly imagine that William Hunter refrained from contacting his old friend for more than two years.

² British merchants were long established at Leghorn, which was a free port, and the centre for English trade in that part of the Mediterranean.

³ Sir David Murray of Stanhope, Peebles, nephew and heir of Sir Alexander Murray (d. 1743), was the son of David Murray, a merchant at Leith. He succeeded to the baronetcy, 18 March 1743. As captain of a regiment of Hussars, he was active in the Jacobite rising of 1745, but was taken prisoner and sentenced to death at York, when, having been attainted, his title was forfeited and his estates sold. He joined Charles Edward, the young Pretender, in France, and was with him at the time of his arrest in Paris in 1749. It is possible his reason for coming to Leghorn in 1770 was to join the Pretender, who was then in nearby Pisa. See G.E.C., *Complete Baronetage*, vol. III, 1903, 343; *The Genealogist*, New Series, vol. xv, pp. 201-2. Previously only partially identified by Edward S. Noyes, *The Letters of Tobias Smollett*, M.D., Harvard, 1926, pp. 228-9.

mend him in the strongest manner to your friendly offices, persuaded as I am of his modesty & merit.

For the news of Leghorne I refer you to his Information from which you will learn the particulars of an Earthquake¹ [several words illegible] us all two days ago. Exhausted as I am in point of Health, I could [?] not relish the prospect of being buried while any signs of Life remained. The very thoughts of being smothered, are capable of giving a healthy man, a fit of the asthma, & therefore you may judge what Effect it had upon me who have laboured so many years under an incessant Difficulty in breathing.

Jesting apart, I hold out wonderfully. I eat heartily; enjoy good spirits; & can walk a considerable way on plain ground: but ascents of all kinds I find extremely difficult; and in the night, I am much troubled with sudden attacks of the *Tussis convulsiva*.² I was under some apprehension that I should find the air of Leghorne much more unfavourable than <the air of Pisa> where I passed the two last Winters; but I keep my Health much better here than at *Pisa*, and I ascribe the Difference to the sea air which hath been always propitious to my Constitution.

I need not say that I should be glad to hear from you if you have half an hour to throw away, I crave your charity, addressed *A Mons^r Smollett chez Mons^r. Renner negociant a Livorne³ en Toscane*; & you must pay the foreign Postage; otherwise it will not be forwarded to Dear Doctor

Yours affectionately.

T^s. Smollett

Leghorne Jan^y 9, 1771

pray give my service to M^r Mylne⁴ & ask him if he did not receive a Letter from me in the Summer before last.

My wife & M^{rs} Renner send you their most cordial Respects.

¹ For further details of the earthquake at Leghorn, see Knapp, *Letters*, op. cit., p. 139.

² R. James, M.D., *A Medicinal Dictionary*, 3 vols, 1743-5, vol. III, describes the convulsive cough, which 'rages with such unbounded Fury, and agitates the Patient with such Concussions, that he frequently seems to be in Danger of a Suffocation'.

³ For George Renner, see Lewis M. Knapp, *Tobias Smollett Doctor of Men and Manners*, Princeton, 1949, *passim*.

⁴ Presumably Robert Mylne (1734-1811), Scottish architect and engineer, who designed Blackfriars Bridge. Smollett praises the design of this bridge in his *Travels through France and Italy*, ed. Thomas Seacombe, 1907, p. 247, and in *Humphry Clinker*, Everyman edition, 1943, p. 83. In 1770, Mylne married Mary Home, whose elder sister Anne became the wife of Dr John Hunter in the following year.