

THE ELIBANK PLOT

Alexander Ruadh MacDonnell (c. 1725–1761)

to Henry Pelham (1694–1754), Prime Minister (1743–1754)

Alexander MacDonnell, a Scottish Jacobite, in 1738 fled his abusive father and joined the French Royal Scots Regiment. In 1744, the Jacobite Court sent him back to Scotland to spy for them. Captured by the Hanoverians during the 1745 rising, MacDonnell spent almost two years in the Tower of London. In 1749 offered to become a double agent, spying on the Jacobites for the Hanoverians, in which capacity he served under the code-name PICKLE until his death.

In 1752, Alexander Murray (1712–1778) of Elibank, a leading Jacobite in England, developed a plan to seize Saint James' Palace and the Tower of London, kidnap the royal family, and send George II to France, thus fomenting a pro-Stuart rising in the British Isles. MacDonnell uncovered this plot, and reported it to Henry Pelham in this coded letter from France.

Boulogne, 4 November 1752

Though I delayed till now acquainting you of my arrival this side of the water, yet I hope you will not attribute my silence either to neglect or forgetfulness of my friends. I mostly pass my time in company of my old acquaintances who have each in their turn entertained me handsomely. I am now returning the compliment.

Notwithstanding my endeavours, I have lost sight of Goring.¹ I took a trip in hopes to meet him, at which time I had a long chat with Sir James Harington,² who is in top spirits and assures me that very soon a scene will be opened that will astonish most of envoys. Whatever may be in this, I can for certain assure you that the King of Prussia³ will countenance it, for three months ago the Pretender's son was well received there. He has left that part, for he was within these twenty days not the distance of thirty leagues from this town.

This depend upon, and were you to credit all he says, it would be justly termed what the french term *merveille*. Whatever is in it they keep all very hush from the Pretender, though I have some reason to believe that Sir John Graeme was dispatched to him lately, for he disappeared from Paris four days ago.

Whatever tune they intend to play of this, Scotland is not desired to move, until London pulls off the mask. If the French Ministry countenances the Pretender's son, its through the influence of the King of Prussia. I have some reason to believe they do, for the Pretender's son is accompanied by one of that faction. I suspect it's Count Maillebois,⁴ but I can't be positive until I go to Paris, which I think a most necessary jaunt in this juncture, for if the Lord Marshall⁵ has no finger in the pie, I lost my host of all.

When I am a few days at Paris, I take a trip sixty leagues further south to meet Sir John Graeme and some other friends, when I will be able to judge of matters by my reception from them and the French Ministry, and if the last are concerned I must beg leave not to write upon these topics, for no precaution can prevent a discovery in this country. Should this be the case and that anything particular cast up, I will make the quickest dispatch to lay before you in person all I can learn of these affairs. I only wait here for your orders, and be assured whatever they be they will be obeyed with pleasure.

I have not had time to write to my worthy old friend,⁶ so I beg you'll acquaint him that the place he visits ought to be looked after with a watchful eye.

¹ Henry Goring (–1754), Equerry to Charles Stuart

² Sir James (c. 1705–1782), Baronet Harington of Merton

³ Frederick II (1712–1786), King of Prussia (1740–1786)

⁴ Yves-Marie Desmarets (1715–1791), Comte de Mallebois, French general and governor of Douai

⁵ George Keith (1693–1778), Earl Marischal and Prussian Ambassador to Paris

⁶ Gwynne Vaughan

I doubt not but D.B.¹ has informed you of his receiving a few lines from me by last post, in which I acquainted him that I was necessitated to throw away some money and be at a very considerable expence. I do not pretend to make a particular demand, yet I assure you £200 sterling is necessary, and I entirely refer to yourself to diminish or augment, only I beg you be convinced that no selfish interesting view occasions my making this demand, but only that I would be vexed. Want of cash would disappoint either of us in our expectations, since I do assure you that I don't look upon anything I touch upon such journeys as solid, for it does not long stick in my pockets. I will drop this point, being fully persuaded if my correspondence proves anything amusing, such bagatelle will not be grudged, but if I go forward, I beg credit be sent me either upon this place or Paris. Any money I receive passes for being remitted by the order of Baron Kennedy.²

All this is fully submitted to your better judgement, only I beg you'll be fully persuaded how much I have the honour to remain, sir, your most obedient and most humble servant.

P.S.—Lord Strathallan³ left this a few days ago to meet Lord George Murray,⁴ some say at the Hague, others at his house near Claves.

Andrew Lang, *Pickle the Spy* (London: Longman, Green, and Company, 1897):172–175

¹ Mr. Bruce, an English official

² Major Kennedy, code-named *Thomas Newton* in Pickle's correspondence

³ James Drummond (1722–1765), heir of Viscount Strathallan, which peerage Parliament attained in 1746

⁴ George Murray (1706–1785), elder brother of Alexander Murray