

Transcript of 2800

Note: This is a transcription of a cross-written letter, where the horizontal lines of writing were written across vertically to save paper and postage costs. This method of writing was quite common at the time, and can be very difficult to read. Dubious words and suggested readings are in square brackets like [this]. Paragraph breaks have been inserted to improve legibility. These are not present in the original.

To Mr James Stewart,
Sheriff Officer,
Tain,
Ross-shire.

Liverpool, 21 Kent Street
17 July 1836

My dear Father,

By my letter from Edinburgh to the address of Bishop, and my subsequent V.P. notes hence, you will already be fully aware of my having arrived here to fill the situation of my good friend Mr McPherson. In that letter, the excerpts I had given from his letter to me, intimating my appointment to the vacancy, will have made you, in connection with what you previously knew of his exertions in my behalf, fully to understand the manner in which he has succeeded in at last giving a substantial proof of his Friendship. More opportunely his assistance could not have come, for, the tool of suspense and apprehension I have been, and the apparent butt of the malicious humours of Fortune. Hither to, she has, at length, turned up a bright spoke of her [inconstant] wheel, and placed me in an intirely new sphere of life – the great arena of commercial pride and enterprise, where ample scope and [?] is offered for the advancement of young mens ambitions to raise themselves above the level of their [compeers].

Unlike the profession which I hitherto was fixed to, in which few, very few in these days, can gain a livelihood, far less raise themselves to any degree of respect, there is in the mercantile line a constantly swelling tide of promotion, by which young men are constantly moved on, unless their own misconduct interferes like a [?] to [?] them in an eternal [puddle] or sink them below the rising tide – and by which all the well-behaved at last are thrown higher or lower on the beach of Commercial prosperity, just as they are caught by the current of fortune, favour, or merit. But still, tho gradual, this current is fine.

In the Law now, when impartially and fairly viewed by an attentive and intelligent observer who knows it as it is, and the various effects and changes worked by, and in it, there is an immutable fixedness, which ties down even men of the brightest genius in unnoticed mediocrity, whence they need never, unless handed up by the favour of influence and wealth, expect to move. In short, one may now spend all his days as a Clerk and only get £50, or £60, at the [most], of a salary – or he may, allowing him the luck of

the best off, get paid by his writings and earn a £100 [?], at best, he lives miserably with the one [?] support the [?] of a gentleman with the other, [out] of either can save nothing, and, consequently, can never, unless he have the fortune to get a few hundreds by any lucky chance, expect to be able to set up in business on his own account.

Now, let us even suppose, for hypothesis sake, that he had money at his command, paid his fee of £50 for the privilege of being admitted a member of a Society of Villains, practising as they do, all the pettifogging and crafty dishonesty so characteristic of the profession in the country, and carried on on such a magnificent and extended scale in Edinburgh, and that he has fairly established as Writer and Notary, - whence comes his business? He has not one out of a hundred chances in his favour, and without the most powerful connections and interest among the landed interest, need expect none, even tho his talents should be of the first order; these can only procure him the fluctuating and unprofitable countenance of the lower and poorer class of litigants, to whom he must bow with the most degrading servility at the same time that his fortune depends upon their caprice, or their capability to pay his bills.

To be sure, a few but select number, do get into tolerable business; but these only thru great influence, or thru some such lucky chance as befel Thomas Taylor, but which does not happen to one in 500. In short, the balance of legal power, or the prospect it affords, are radically changed and quite disheartening, and, instead of being one of the most lucrative and respectable, it is now one of the poorest professions. Not so the wide fields [?] up by the flourishing Commerce of the Kingdom, which holds out a constantly brightening prospect to a young man of promotion, both in his native country, and more especially in the various Foreign countries, with which we trade so extensively. But I need not be [?] into a dissertation on the subject, which you understand more fully than I do myself. It falls on me now to give you a description of my new situation.

My employers name is Mr Pratt, an old Yankee Captain of the Merchant Service and now a Ship Chandler. He is about 60 years of age and upwards rather close, I should think, on 70, a most honest and gentlemanly man in his way, but with, as you are already aware, from a hint I used to tell you of him from Mr McPhersons letters to me at home, one of the quickest and most ill natured tempers ever possessed by man; now rendered more irritable by the infirmities of Old Age, and by no means softened down by the aspirities of a seafaring life. Yet his ill humours are as quickly gone as they are liable hurriedly to return, and in the course of one ten minutes, you see in him the most violent and crabbed tyrant, and the kindest Master, tho the former is certainly the predominant and [?] temperament in the counting house.

At his house where I dined twice since my arrival, he has all the affability and kindness of a good Host and finished gentleman, together with that perculiar feature of the Americans, and which he displays in private and in business - a frank and free communication, by which he equalizes himself with his inferiors. His family, consisting of several daughters and a son, who has, however, turned out a profligate and worthless fellow, are all married respectably except one, a woman about 18 or 19, a polite Yankee

in manners, of good appearance, and highly accomplished, and on whom the old fellow dotes.

His business lies wholly with the American Ships, whom he supplies with all marine stores (except provisions), which is cordage, canvas, blocks, tar, oils, paints, cables, carpenters tools, spars, twine, and all the material necessarys for a ship, his sales of which have averaged about a £100 a day, since I came here. Few, if any American vessels pass, and there have been at least 40 constantly in port, 2 or 3 clearing out every day, and as many arriving. My business is to keep the books, and to make out the Ships accounts and [?], which keeps me constantly employed. My hours are from 8 to 12 when I go to dinner (!) and from ½ past 1 till 6. I have to be often among the ships, getting bills paid or orders on the owners or [?] of the ships for their amount [?] which renders the business pleasing in [?] far as it is not [?] confined and keeps [me] a good deal in exercise; sometimes I have to walk much – as yesterday, when I reckon that I traveled at least 16 or 20 miles round and thru the town and docks without ever thinking of getting tired.

From the nature of the business only one Clerk is necessary, and yet our establishment is a strange compound of nationality. Mr P is a Yankee, I a Scot, the Warehouseman an Englishman, the Porter Irish, and a generally useful man Welsh.

But next it becomes necessary to instruct you how to account for my coming here to fill this situation in preference to David MP; and privately, I may say to you that Alex just considered me in greater want of a secure birth than his brother, first the critical manner in which I held on in Edinburgh, secondly David was at home and could wait, while my necessities were urgent and was besides intending immediately to proceed to London where he had an influential friend in his cousin, and lastly, because he knew too well his brothers deplorably loose business habits to recommend him to one who required every possible attention and correctness, and because he also cherished the most friendly feelings to his old & inseparable companion, whose society he longed for.

But this the true edition of the matter must be private, as I already informed you, and I trust you have kept it so, for you know Grannie Reach's character too much to suppose for an instant that Alex' most potent arguments or her own unbounded affection and confidence, could prevent her from ascribing his conduct to motives far different from those by which he was activated. In order therefore to prevent a Storm, the matter must be ascribed to the agency of W. Donald Munro, who got the place for Sandy himself, and who she knows herself to have been long looking out for a birth for me, altho unsuccessful; let them understand my difficulties with [?] (of blasted memory) even should it be at the expense of an impression unfavourable to me (for I would suffer anything rather than another should be injured on my account, merely for performing a kindly office of affection for a friend to whom he was devotedly attached), that I applied in this emergency to Mr Munro, who immediately recommended me to the vacancy thus [occurring], and that I was thru him selected as Mr McP's successor. In short, every fact necessary may be told, except Alex's agency, and the whole will be strictly true – but there must be no elucidation of his conduct, or nothing which can in any way subject him

to the anger of his relatives, which is really undeserved; in short he had nothing to do with the matter.

So far then you understand our concerted plan, and will I hope act upon it. Were I not in such a precarious predicament, and even were his brothers necessities more pressing, it would be much against Sandy's inclination to appoint David as his successor, knowing so well how very uncongenial the temper of he and Mr Pratt would be, & how impossible it is for one of greater solidity of temper and patience to please the [?] humours of the old gentleman. But I have said enough altogether to make you, I hope, understand the [?] of my present situation, the manner in which I really got it, and the light in which it is to be represented, and I will now pass on to a short and feeble sketch of this city – one of the greatest emporiums of trade now in the world – second indeed to none but London.

When I first visited Glasgow I was astonished by the immense number of shipping in the Clyde from Greenock to the Broomielaw, the town itself is a tolerably fine city, with some fine buildings, and all built of stone, and [?] an appearance of bustle and business, with its shipping, numerous manufactory chimneys, and dense atmosphere of smoke which far surpasses anything I had ever conceived. Edinburgh again with its streets of palaces and crowded streets appeared certainly a crowded and bustling place, but then it only [?] as the centre of fashion and the emporium of Law, and compared with Glasgow was like a beautiful hamlet, surrounded by charming scenery, and populated by a quiet and enterprising people, while Leith with all the shipping it could muster, and its 8 or 9 steamers, was but a fishing village.

Fancy then what was my astonishment, when entering the Mersey, I saw up before us, for at least 4 or 5 miles, one interminable forest of shipping, thru which it required the skill of a good helmsman to steer the splendid boat in which we sailed, clear of all accident. The docks extend along the North side of the river for about 2 miles in front of the town, and are crowded as thick as they can [stand], with hundreds of ships of all nations, and of all varieties of shape, dimension and rigging, from the tall and stately Indiaman, or the neat and beautifully formed American, with her tall and tapering masts and spars and snow white canvas, to the low and [?] Dutchman, or the heavy [?] with now and then, at anchor in the river, the beautiful and symmetrical man of war, with her [brazen teeth], long and [?] spars, and square yards, looking like a beautiful seagull flying on the wings of the storm.

Besides the docks, the river [?] full 4 miles in length, and over its breadth which from a mile gradually widens to about 2 miles in breadth, is literally [crossed] with ships, while scores of steamers are continually seen coming and going out leaving behind them clouds of smoke. The town itself possesses no beauty, being entirely built of brick, but then its numerous warehouses, the immense bustle, the hundreds of wagons and carts continually driving back and fore with the cargos of the ships and thru which one can sometimes scarcely wend his way, the constant crowds moving thru the streets all tend to give one an overpowering idea of the immensity of business done in it, and the vast riches of its merchants.

One would naturally suppose all this would conspire to render it an unhealthy city, but it is not so, there are but few manufactories here & never such an unwholesome cloudy atmosphere as in Glasgow, or the neighbouring manufacturing towns of Manchester, Sheffield or Birmingham, where the smoke of the numerous public works must be highly [deleterious].

I have been presented by Mr P with a Ticket of admission to the “Literary Mercantile & Scientific Institute” where I am now studying with all attention; the sum he paid was £2 which entitles me to the benefit of a splendid Library & newsroom, & to attend any or all the classes I choose. My course of study is as follows; Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings I attend the French and Spanish classes; Tuesday evening the Debating & commercial classes; and Thursday the lectures on Natural Philosophy. Saturday evening I intend to devote to the Geography and drawing classes, and when I have finished the commercial class, I propose to join a class for Composition and essay writing.

I got one or two letters of introduction from W Munro & Mr Wood in Tain, which may be of use to me. I was also introduced by Mr Donald Munro, to one or two very respectable gentlemen, among the rest to a Mr Drysdale at [?] house. I had tea and supper on Friday along with W.M., Mr Bethune, his nephew, and Mr McPherson. There were several present, among others, Mr Alex the portrait painter & his lady & a Mr [Tolshuin], a Broker. We had a pleasant evening with no less than 10 Scotsmen of us present. By the bye I wish David McCray would send me a receipt for carving turkey, for I felt myself [?] uncomfortable alongside of one which made my teeth water, at the same time that I dreaded the onslaught.

I think George did right in refusing Taylor’s offer, he should certainly not enter any office without a salary, - that was the [?] on which I struck. If he could get into any of the banks, that would be the best for him, but his time is still valuable at school, let him labour at writing and arithmetic – day & night, these are the two grand essentials, & if he was once perfect there, I would not care whether he got into an office in Tain, or not. It is not so very desirable a favor as Tain gentlemen seem to think. I think, nay I am pretty sure I can get him a situation here by the time he is fit for one, at all events, can get him [nominated] my successor if I obtain a better birth myself, when I begin to understand business. But if he could get into an office, or even a good shop, to form his hand well, to give him a little knowledge of business, it would be of importance, but his studies are everything now. French may yet be of the greatest use to him, & he should continue to cultivate it, but his labour at Greek [?] would serve him little in the world – arithmetic & writing are the grand weapons with which he can at all make himself useful. I hope James is still attentive, the same course is before him, & I trust he will begin to think. I am glad to hear upon the whole the favorable [?] as of Willie and of Donald.

I have now nearly run over all the space my paper will afford, altho I have not said one half of what I intended to write, but I shall take an early opportunity of again writing of various matters yet indisposed of. I would have written you long ere now of my arrival here by post, but that I wished before doing so to have it in my power to say something of my new situation, and I trust you will receive this as a sufficient apology, along with a

desire to incur as little expense as possible, for one must be economic [?] in Liverpool. I expect that you shall write me as soon as you conveniently can, for I am now very anxious to hear of & from you all, as its long since I have had a letter, & was made quite unhappy by hearing from your last that both my Mother and yourself were still in ill health. I trust however that the good summer weather we have had has considerably [restored] you both, & I shall be looking forward with pleasure for such intelligence. Remember me kindly to my Uncle & cousins & to John Simpson, & Willie. Why don't they write me – I sent both of them a TP note since I came here. Mr Bethune wishes that you would call on Sandy Wallace & remember him kindly to him. [?] W.M.P. and I live here together. Remember me also to John Ross, & since he so unkindly [disdains] to write, let me know how he is, for I feel much for him. Let George McKenzie & Mr Donald Murray with his "Gillies" be also put in mind of me. With love to my dearest mother, self, & whole family circle. Believe me, ever your most affectionate & dutiful Son,

John C. Stewart

I have dispatched a letter to Duncan today by a Ship which clears out in the morning.