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## ROMANCE, POLITICS OR MADNESS?

### JOHN PAUL JONES AND THE COUNTESS OF SELKIRK

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NOT long ago a reference librarian asked to see a rare periodical from our Special Collections. Upon retrieving it from the shelves, I noticed that the handwriting on the flyleaf looked vaguely familiar. The inscription read "Your most Obedient and most humble Servant. Jno. P. Jones. The Right Honourable The Countess of Selkirk. Scotland." A little research confirmed my suspicions. The book, the *United States Magazine* (Philadelphia, 1779), was inscribed and signed by John Paul Jones (1747-1792), naval hero of the American Revolution. Although of great rarity and considerable monetary value, Jones' autograph on a volume would ordinarily have little historical significance. But the inscription links this particular book with one of the most daring and romantic episodes of his swashbuckling career.

The incident began on the evening of April 22, 1778. It was nearly a year and a half before Jones was to achieve immortality for his "I have not yet begun to fight" remark, but he was rapidly gaining a reputation as one of the most audacious commanders on the sea. His project that night was to raid the port of Whitehaven, on the southern coast of Scotland. Materially, the raid proved inconsequential. Warned by a traitor in Jones' crew, the townspeople extinguished

most of the fires before significant damage was done. But the propaganda value of the attack was immense. No one had dared raid a British port in more than a century, and such behavior was least expected from a crude provincial navy! The British Isles were put in a state of panic, with neighboring seaports alerted, emergency militia units formed and London newspapers bemoaning "the 'defenseless' state of the coast and the 'inexcusable' laxness of government."<sup>1</sup>

Undismayed by his failure at Whitehaven, Jones prepared for his next plan—another landing on the Scottish coast. This was indeed a bold move, considering his target was only a few miles from the tumult he had created at Whitehaven the previous evening. Long concerned with the plight of American prisoners of war, he hoped to kidnap an important British official and use his captive to bargain for the release of American prisoners. His intended victim—Hamilton Dunbar, the Earl of Selkirk.

Assuming that such a scheme would have had any effect on the British ministry, Jones should have chosen a more illustrious hostage. Selkirk was an insignificant Scottish peer who was virtually unknown in London. But Jones had been reared in Selkirk's bailiwick, and the Earl was the only nobility with whom he had had any contact. Possibly boyhood fantasies reappeared, and when he sought to abduct an important nobleman, his thoughts would have naturally turned to the great Lord Selkirk. The choice of Selkirk probably was inconsequential in the final analysis, since it is doubtful that the British government would have considered Jones' demands under any circumstances. In retrospect, however, Selkirk was a fitting choice. Wasted efforts on a petty earl add to the futility of the whole scheme, a futility which enhances the incident's romantic interest.

About ten in the morning Jones' ship *Ranger* anchored in Kirkcudbright Bay. Jones, two officers and a crew of twelve embarked for the shore. Under the clever ruse that he commanded a press gang "recruiting" for His Majesty's Navy, Jones had no trouble clearing the area of all potential male resistance. But to no avail. From the Selkirks' gardener he learned that the Earl was not at home. His mission aborted, Jones determined to return to the ship.

But his officers cautioned against so casual an abandoning of the project. Although they had made history the night before, the poten-

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones, a Sailor's Biography* (Boston, 1959), 142.

tial awe of future generations was little comfort to the crew. While other sailors were collecting prize money, they were being asked to undergo considerably greater risks for none of the profit. They wanted booty. Jones, unaware that the failure at Whitehaven was due to inside treachery, possibly attributed it to an indifferent attitude on the part of his crew. His officers advised that it would be unwise to return to the *Ranger* empty-handed and that the crew should be allowed to loot the mansion. Although he wished to avoid any rash action, he realized that his crew must be satiated if he was to retain their cooperation. He was left with a difficult decision to make.

Jones' decision was wise and quick. He would send the two officers and some of the men to the mansion to "liberate" the family silver. However, nothing else in the house was to be touched, and its inhabitants were not to be harmed. It is a credit to Jones' leadership that his orders were carried out to the letter.

In the mansion were Selkirk's wife, young son, several daughters, a few guests and numerous servants. Upon observing the intruders, most of the residents fled to the top story of the house. Lady Selkirk, the governess and butler remained below. The two officers entered, explained that they were Americans, and that they had come for the silver. They advised the Countess that if she complied no further demands would be made on any occupants of the house. Realizing that resistance was futile, the Countess agreed.

The intrusion lasted only about fifteen minutes. Lady Selkirk saw that all the silver was given to the officers and admonished her servants for trying to conceal certain pieces. Meanwhile, the governess chatted with the sailors outside, eagerly seeking information about America. When all the silver had been gathered, the Countess offered Jones' two officers a glass of wine, which they accepted. They then took their leave, along with the silver, and returned to Jones. Within two hours after anchoring, Jones and his men were safely back on the *Ranger*.

Lady Selkirk's conduct was largely responsible for the low-key atmosphere of the raid. No doubt Jones' officers and men had great respect for him and would have obeyed his orders under any reasonable circumstances, but her composure, restraint and cooperation were instrumental in saving him from potential embarrassment. The Sel-

kirk incident was to cause him much embarrassment, but it was to be all his own doing.

Thus began a very strange relationship between Jones and the Countess. Whether stirred by accounts of her bravery or whether he still exaggerated her husband's importance cannot be determined. Morison suggests that Jones was trying to enhance his standing with the Selkirks in the event that he should decide to return to his boyhood home after the war.<sup>2</sup> But whatever the reason, he wrote her a long letter soon after the raid. Much of the letter deals with the reasons for the raid, but Jones went far beyond what one would ordinarily deem a sufficient apology for his conduct. He seemed very eager to win Lady Selkirk's support:

I hope this cruel contest will soon be closed; but should it continue, I wage no War with the Fair. I acknowledge their power, and bend before it with profound Submission; let not therefore the Amiable Countess of Selkirk regard me as an Enemy. I am ambitious of her esteem and Friendship, and would do anything consistant with my duty to merit it.

The honor of a Line from your hand in Answer to this will lay me under a very singular Obligation; and if I can render you any acceptable service in France or elsewhere; I hope you will see into my character so far as to command me without the least grain of reserve.<sup>3</sup>

That he was trying to win the Countess' favor is further documented by an offer to return the silver:

I have gratified my Men and when the plate is sold, I shall become the Purchaser, and I will gratify *my own feelings* by restoring it to you, by such conveyance as you shall be pleased to direct.<sup>4</sup>

As a note of interest, Jones did purchase the silver and returned it to the Selkirks after the war.

Jones must have been extremely proud of his composition. Not only did he send Lady Selkirk three separate copies to insure delivery, but he sent copies to Franklin, Arthur Lee and the Marine Committee of Congress. He even included it in his 1786 *Memoire* to King Louis XVI, where he stated that the Countess was so eager to meet him that she proposed to accompany his officers to Jones and invite him to dinner!<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 151. Since there are no reliable transcripts of the Jones-Selkirk correspondence and since I find Morison's biography to be the most detailed and accurate, I have based the narrative portions of this article on Morison's work.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

Jones never received a reply in Lady Selkirk's "hand." This obligation was undertaken by her husband in a cool letter which questions Jones' use of good judgment. Selkirk admitted having no influence with the King; indeed, he disapproved of most measures of the ministry, especially those concerning the war against America. He informed Jones that the only effect his abduction would have had would have been personal injury to a politically agreeable family. He proceeded to note the incongruity between Jones' alleged hatred for war and his countenancing of kidnapping schemes. Selkirk rightly assumed that such an undertaking would have been condemned by all governments involved, lest it unleash an uncontrollable chain of reprisals. One has merely to reflect on today's surge of political kidnappings to confirm Selkirk's forebodings.

Jones never received this letter. It is probable that he went to his grave without realizing what a fool he had made of himself. Such knowledge may have cautioned him against further reckless and hastily conceived exploits, but speed and daring were an indispensable part of John Paul Jones. Had he been more cautious, Jones probably would have never achieved the reputation he enjoys today. Caution and timidity were not in Jones' character, and it is questionable whether Selkirk's retribution would have had much effect on his future career.

The larger picture aside, what about Jones' relationship with Lady Selkirk? Why did he over-react to a woman he had never met? None of the reasons suggested previously in this article can be documented. We do know that Jones kept his promise and returned the silver, but no correspondence, other than the initial letter to the Countess, has been discovered. And yet, nearly two years after the incident, Jones was inscribing (and presumably sending) this book to his esteemed lady. It is probable that he was trying to influence her politically, since the *United States Magazine* is largely an exposition of the American reasons for rebellion. But pending further evidence, one can do little more than consider the affair as another unexplained episode in a mysterious, exciting and often tragic life.

The reader may wonder how such a volume ever made its way into the Rutgers University Library. Unfortunately, that is another elusive question. The Library purchased the book in the 1930's, but the source cannot be traced due to the absence of accession records

for that period. Notations on the title-page, probably dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, indicate that the volume was once owned by a Baltimore family named Luckey. Although one of the three Americans to attend Jones' funeral (he died in Paris) was a Baltimore tourist, the available evidence does not warrant an assumption that the book somehow made its way from Jones' personal effects to Baltimore via this traveller. Who knows! If the history of this book after Jones' inscribing it were known, the story might be as fascinating as the Jones-Selkirk episode itself.

Disconcerting as the unanswered questions initiated by such a find may be, the rewards far outweigh the frustration. I suppose one must have an innate love for antiquity to be a rare books and manuscripts librarian in the first place, and therefore any discovery of the choice or unusual stirs the imagination. To discover a hitherto unknown autograph of John Paul Jones, and an historically important one at that, shelved amidst the routine array of old leather, paper and dust was exhilarating. It is times like this which render the shortcomings of the profession almost insignificant.

I doubt that this particular book will add substantially to our knowledge of Jones or his contemporaries, but one wonders about the extent of yet-to-be discovered historical research materials. Jones' inscription apparently went undetected for nearly two centuries, and yet he was a major historical figure. Who can say what kinds of evidence might be lying around which could significantly alter popular images of the great, near-great and not-so-great! Librarians, autograph dealers and collectors are frequently in good positions to uncover such types of neglected history, but the opportunities are not theirs exclusively. Important historical documents have been found in some of the most unlikely places. Washington's original plan for the Battle of Germantown was discovered in a sewing basket, and the manuscript of Franklin's autobiography came from an attic in Mount Holly, New Jersey. While the era of the proverbial attic "find" is virtually past, there are a lot of attics and few experts to search them. A little detective work on the part of the layman could prove most rewarding. All it takes is literacy, a little time and, in some cases, an attic.