

Choices 24 and 25
Ramsay's Portrait of Walpole and
Berwick's of Conway

One day in the summer of 1931 Annie Burr and I had tea at Nuneham Park with the dowager Lady Harcourt. Nuneham was a place of pilgrimage for me because it was the house that I think Walpole most enjoyed visiting. He delighted in everything about it, its "own beauties," its gardens, which he called "the quintessence of nosegays," and its talented owner, George Simon 2d Earl Harcourt and his wife who wrote verses.

Harcourt was an amateur artist who Walpole said etched landscapes "in a very great style" and whose views of his other house in Oxfordshire, Stanton Harcourt, were "the richest etchings I ever saw, and masterly executed." Walpole begged Lady Harcourt in vain to let him print her verses, which he said were written "in a very natural style." I was eager to see "the paradise on earth" and Walpole's letters to Harcourt, fifty-seven in number, which were there. On our first visit Lady Harcourt asked the housekeeper to produce them, a request carried out with marked distaste. The housekeeper told us darkly that an American who said he was a professor came to see the letters years before and she was sure he had made off with some of them. The most common explanation for the disappearance of family papers in England is a fire; the second most common explanation is the visit of an American professor.

I didn't touch the letters, but admired the portraits in oval frames above the library shelves, Locke, Pope, Gray, and so on, including an unrecorded portrait of Horace Walpole, "By Gogain, after Allan Ramsay." Since it was the custom in the eighteenth century to give copies of one's portraits to friends it was not surprising to find Walpole at Nuneham, but in 1931 I was still uninitiated in the science of iconography and assumed that the copy couldn't be of Walpole because it doesn't appear in the Toynbees' edition of his letters. When a few years later I found in the house of a Walpole relation a second Gogain of Ramsay's portrait in-



Allan Ramsay's portrait of Horace Walpole.

scribed on its frame "The Hon. Horace Walpole copied from an original picture of him at Nuneham," I was still too uninstructed to do more than wonder mildly about the original Ramsay.

I found it ultimately through the Agony Column of the *Times* when in 1936 my advertisement brought this letter:

Dear Sir

Accidently I heard you were interested in Strawberry Hill. My family and I have a larg [*sic*] number of painting and watercolors from the great sale and by inheritance. Angelica Kaufmans and Paul Sandbys. Aylesbury tapestries etc If you are sufficiently interested I shall be glad to show you some of them at least My grandfather and Anne Seymour Damer were close connections

Nothing for sale

Yrs faithfully

H. Campbell Johnston.

Campbell Johnston was a promising name, allied to the Argyll family in which were Lord Frederick Campbell, Walpole's executor, and his sister Lady Ailesbury, Conway's wife. They were uncle- and aunt-in-law of Sir Alexander Johnston of Carnsalloch, Dumfriesshire, the enlightened reorganizer of Ceylon early in the nineteenth century.

H. Campbell Johnston was one of his descendants, as I discovered when I called on him in Kensington. His flat (third floor back), his clothes, his chastened manner, indicated one who had seen better days. He admitted that the Walpoliana did not belong to him, but to a younger brother, D. Campbell Johnston. However, he went on earnestly, his brother would show them to me at tea, and he did so a few days later in his big house in Hans Road. Also present in the drawing-room besides the elder brother was a younger sister. My entrance was irregular because on walking into the room I saw several objects from Strawberry Hill and acknowledged them by a cry of recognition before greeting my host. There are dead-pan collectors who suppress such cries hoping to pay less for the coveted objects, but I think I have gained by my undisguised delight on seeing them. In the drawing-room were Müntz's sketch of Walpole in the library at Strawberry Hill, two drawings of Conway at Park Place by Paul Sandby, Eccardt's conversation piece of Conway, Lady Ailesbury, and Mrs Damer, when a child, and two of Lady Ailesbury's needlework tapestries in silk. The flame of hope rose in the elder brother as my enthusiasm invested the family treasures with transcendent value. I was aware of this and also that in the bosom of the younger brother no

friendly response stirred, a disappointment, since it was clear that his was the deciding voice in the family councils. The sister was amused by my and her elder brother's eagerness to have something come of the call besides tea and by her younger brother's evident decision that nothing should. I made notes of the Walpoliana, but not, unfortunately, of the conversation. My inquiries in 1937 and 1938 to the younger brother about Walpole's letters to Lord Frederick Campbell received terse replies that he did not have them.

When I was in London in 1942 the Campbell Johnstons had disappeared from all works of reference and I did not pursue their Walpoliana until 1951 when, fortunately, I mentioned them to Owen Morshead who discovered immediately that the objects I saw in Hans Road had descended to Commander Colin Campbell Johnston, who was living at Brighton, and there they were in his drawing-room when I arrived for lunch in a few days. In answer to the question about other members of the family who might own Walpoliana, my host suggested I write to the head of it, the Laird of Carnsalloch, Mr David Campbell Johnston. He replied that he had no Walpole letters, but kindly wrote out the list of contents of the five volumes of *Lord Orford's Works*, 1798, a not uncommon work. As an afterthought he mentioned that he owned Ramsay's portrait of Walpole. I urged him to get an appraisal from the most reputable dealers and auctioneers if he ever decided to part with it, but this gratuitous advice went unacknowledged. After a year I wrote again, sending a copy of my earlier letter, which I feared had gone astray. This time the Laird replied at once, saying there was no use in discussing the matter further unless I was prepared to give him £120 for the picture. When it reached Kingsley Adams's office at the National Portrait Gallery in London en route to Farmington it was discovered that much of it had been cut away—how much appears from Ramsay's preliminary sketch in the National Gallery, Edinburgh, that shows Walpole at his desk holding a quill pen, only the tip of which survives. Despite its mutilation, the portrait ranks among the best known of Walpole because Professor George B. Cooper used it on the dust jacket of the selection of Walpole's letters he encouraged me to make for his large class at Trinity College, Hartford, and that is used in other classrooms as well.

The Laird of Carnsalloch informed a cousin in London, Miss Scholefield, that there was a mad American at Brown's Hotel who would pay anything for Walpoliana and that here was a chance to sell her Gainsborough of Henry Conway and repaint her dining-room. Miss Scholefield

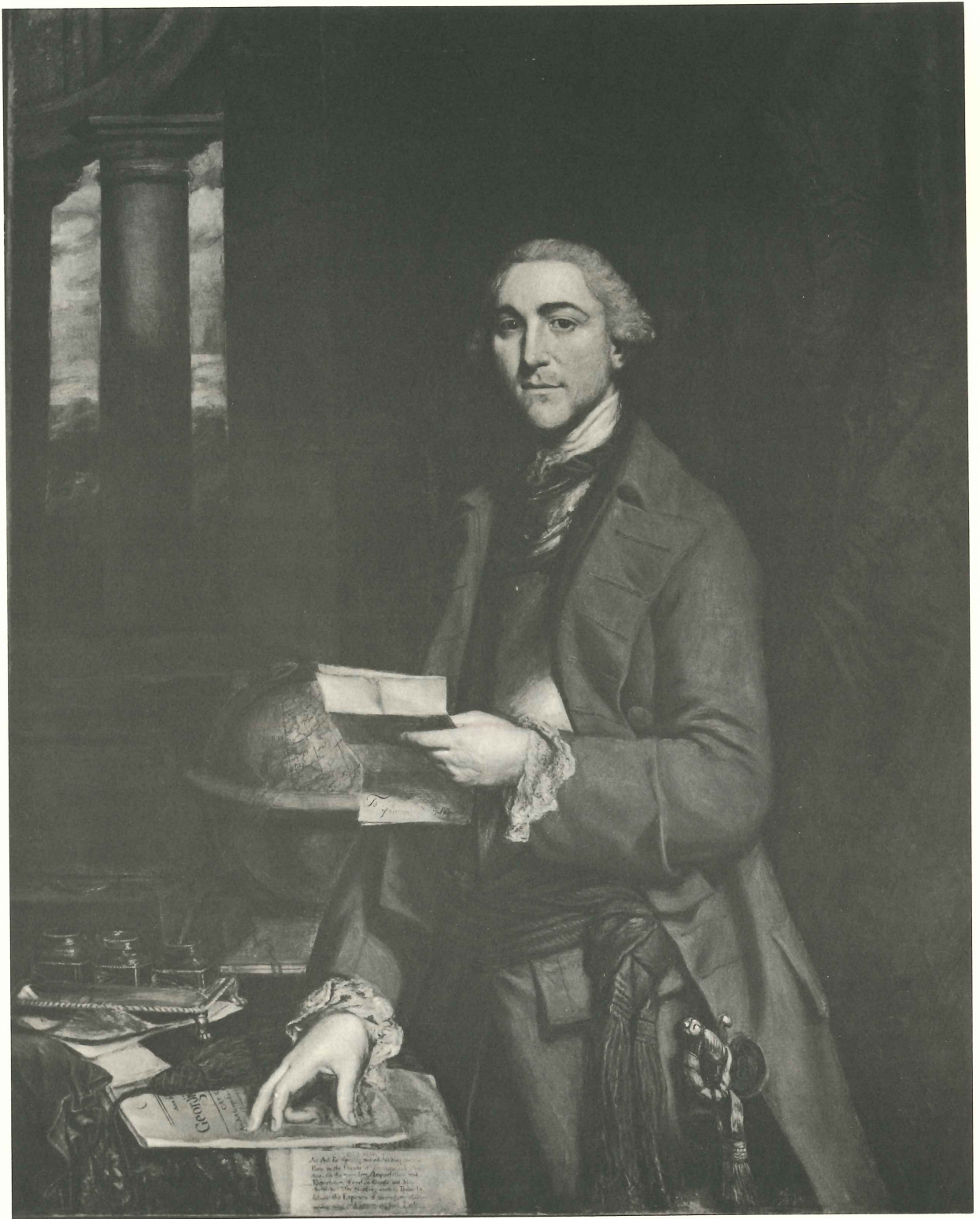
wrote me she would be happy to show me the Gainsborough. I turned to Kingsley Adams for guidance and support. He had succeeded Hake as Director of the Portrait Gallery and the Gallery's records of Conway's portraits were in his brief case when we rang Miss Scholefield's door-bell a few days later. Among the Conway portraits was one that had been exhibited at the New Gallery in 1890-91. It was signed "A. Berwick," who was a copyist, according to Whitley's *Artists and Their Friends in England, 1700-1799*. Miss Scholefield opened her door promptly. She was most cordial, but as we stood wedged in the tiny hall she announced we were not to see the picture until Dr Lewis had passed a test. Adams giggled rather wildly; I bowed acquiescence and Miss Scholefield opened the door behind her and waved towards a scruffy old parrot at the end of the room. The parrot was apparently the test Dr Lewis must pass. I marched right up to its cage not to reason why, but to do or die. "Good morning, Polly," I said distinctly and bowed. Polly turned on me the unwinking gaze of a mature bird. After an appraisal that seemed quite long, it said, "Oik?"

"Oh," Miss Scholefield interpreted, "Polly likes you!"

Encouraged, Dr Lewis told Polly that he trusted she was well and admired her feathers, a few of which she had discarded on the floor of her cage. After another thoughtful pause she stepped delicately off her perch, grasped the wires of the cage with her horrible claws, and turned upside down, in which position she gazed up at Dr Lewis with an expression that was unmistakably flattering.

"Why," Miss Scholefield exclaimed, "Polly likes you *very* much! *He* has never done *that* for anybody." In spite of mistaking Polly's sex Dr Lewis had passed the test.

Miss Scholefield led Adams and me to the small dining-room and the commanding three-quarters-length portrait of Conway that dominated it. As its head and shoulders had been engraved for Lord Orford's *Works*, 1798, they were familiar, but the engraving gives us only Conway the soldier wearing a cuirass; in the portrait he is also the statesman, the Secretary of State for the Southern Department that included the American Colonies. He is standing at a table on which is a red dispatch box, a globe turned to North America, a manuscript copy of his "Free Port Bill" that opened Spain's Caribbean colonies to the Boston merchants, and a copy of the bill, which he also fathered, for the repeal of the Stamp Act. A dark red curtain is at his back; a classical colonnade stretches away on his right. Could the picture be taken down to see what was on the



Field Marshal Henry Seymour Conway by Berwick.

stretcher? Polly screamed assent from the drawing-room and the picture was taken down, a precarious business with Adams standing on a light chair, his arms spread across the picture embracing the frame as he teased it off its hook while Miss Scholefield and I, squatting below, heaved it up with little cries of caution and apprehension. The picture and Adams safely down, we found on the stretcher "A. Berwick pinxit," and the label of the Hanover Exhibition at the New Gallery in 1890-91. There was also a note that the picture belonged to "Mrs Campbell Johnston." Everybody was relieved and delighted. The moment had come to cross the valley of reticence and talk money.

The two principals were what auctioneers call, "A Willing Seller and A Willing Buyer." The latter advised Miss Scholefield to get the best professional advice for a valuation. She looked blank. I rolled off five possibilities: "Agnew, Colnaghi, Leggatt, Christie's, Sotheby's."

"Oh, *Sotheby's*!"

"You know them?"

"No, but I've always liked the name."

I telephoned Vere Pilkington, at that time the senior partner of Sotheby's. "Is he in a red coat?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Bad luck, I'm afraid that will add £20."

After the portrait reached Farmington I told Robert Vail, who was then Director of the New York Historical Society, that the Campbell Johnston family believed the original was painted for "the Town Hall of New York." He kindly explored the matter and found that it was the people of Boston, not New York, who on 18 September 1765, voted their thanks to Conway and requested his portrait for Faneuil Hall. The picture reached it after a delay of nearly two years—while the copy was being made for Conway's family?—but the original was lost during the Revolution. The copy descended to Miss Scholefield, who wrote its new owner to say how happy she was it had found such a good home. Her letter concluded, "Polly sends you the enclosed," which was a snapshot of Polly himself.

Who painted the portrait? Family tradition is not necessarily wrong and a very important critic has said the head at least may be by Gainsborough. The pose is similar to Gainsborough's portrait of Conway owned by the Duke of Argyll, the head of the Campbell clan. The trees seen through the colonnade have a Gainsborroughesque look. My guess is that before Conway sent his portrait to Boston he had the copy made in Gainsborough's studio where I understand A. Berwick was employed and of course I like to think that the head was painted by the master.

The Campbell Johnston connection with Farmington was not ended. In February 1955 a letter arrived from Colombo, Ceylon, signed "James T. Rutnam" who reported to Professor Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis that he owned "about 200 original letters written to Walpole by his cousin Field Marshal Henry Seymour Conway and his wife," Lady Ailesbury. Rutnam said he was a great admirer of Sir Alexander Johnston, the creator of the new Ceylon, and collected him and his family, how extensively was shown by his having bought the Conway letters because Lady Ailesbury was a Campbell into whose family Johnston had married. Rutnam hoped to have the letters published "along with a comprehensive memoir of Conway" and solicited Professor Lewis's "comments in this connection."

Professor Lewis's comments were encouraging. He had tried to find those letters, some seventy of which had been printed in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1850, but the originals had not been seen by Walpole's editors since. "I shall be more than willing to publish your letters in this edition," I assured him on the official letter-head. "Fortunately, it is not too late. Am I right in assuming you do not wish to sell them? If that is so, I hope very much that you will permit me to have them photostated at my expense for use in the Yale Walpole." I concluded by offering to give Mr Rutnam a duplicate set of the photostats and to send him a copy of *Collector's Progress*.

Mr Rutnam's reply was dictated to his wife from the hospital where he had gone with hepatitis. The letters were not for sale, but their owner was willing for them to be photostated and accepted the offer of a set for himself. "With regard to the final disposal of these letters, it is my intention to send them to a worthy library. As presently advised I may perhaps send them to the Yale University. I thank you for the offer of your book and I look forward to receiving an author's copy as early as possible," and also copies of *Life's* article on the Walpole library, Hazen's bibliographies of the Strawberry Hill Press and of Walpole's works.

Things moved swiftly. I had written the present Lord Harcourt who had just been staying with us at Farmington, that Conway's letters to Walpole had turned up in Colombo and he expedited the photostating of them by the Mercantile Bank of India. Letters flew back and forth between Colombo and Farmington. Mr Rutnam used business stationery that gave the telephone numbers of his Office, Stores, and Residence, and his telegraphic address, but did not say what his business was. He disclosed it in mid-May in a letter full of biographical details. He was fifty years of age with nine children, of whom the eldest, aged twenty-one, had become an American citizen and was a Corporal in the U.S. Marines

stationed in the California desert, where Rutnam trusted I would call on him. Rutnam had many personal friends in the United States, the Ceylonese Ambassador and other ranking members of the Embassy; among his business friends were The Export Managers of Four Roses Whiskey and the Galban Lobo Trading Co. in New York. He described himself as "a business man, a merchant who very often strays into letters." His wife and second son had been in Boston the year before to meet members of the Congregational Mission there. Although Mr Rutnam was a pure Ceylonese three of his great-grandparents had taken the impeccable Connecticut names of *Dwight*, *Tappan*, and *Gardiner* on being converted to Christianity by Connecticut Congregational missionaries. He was doing some research in the history of the American Christian Mission to Ceylon during the early part of the last century and he was particularly interested in Sir Alexander Johnston and his family.

In a few days there arrived a column of "Cabbages and Kings," by "Walrus." "Cabbages and Kings" appeared in the *Ceylon Daily News*. "Walrus" was G. J. Padmanabha, who, Mr Rutnam explained, was his son-in-law. Walrus pointed out that "One of the most monumental publishing enterprises of the century" is the Yale Walpole and that "a local collector . . . businessman James T. Rutnam" had made a remarkable contribution to it. "In the course of a recent trip to England Mr Rutnam, a keen student of Ceylon history, did some research in the family history of Sir Alexander Johnson, in the course of which he discovered and acquired 178 letters written by Conway to Walpole, fifteen addressed to Walpole by Conway's wife, the Countess of Ailesbury, and a few miscellaneous items relating to this portion of the Walpole Correspondence. . . . The Conway letters are, we understand, ultimately earmarked for the great Walpole Library at Farmington, Connecticut, where Professor Lewis' own unrivalled collection of Walpoliana is housed."

This was most welcome news. Where, I wondered in my next letter to Rutnam, had he found Conway's letters? I presumed that they were in the younger Campbell Johnston's house in Hans Road when I called there in 1938 and had gone to a nephew or niece I had failed to identify. The answer to my question was silence for four years. It was broken by Mrs Rutnam who was in Boston again in the spring of 1959 and who telephoned me to ask if she might stop off at Farmington to see me and my wife. We couldn't have her because it was towards the end of Annie Burr's last illness. Mrs Rutnam answered most feelingly, made a vow for Annie Burr's recovery, and prayed for her every night thereafter.

Two years later Rutnam wrote that one of his daughters was ill in San Francisco of a serious heart ailment. Mrs Rutnam was with her. Could I be of assistance to them through my friends there? I got in touch with a medical fellow-trustee of the Thacher School, the dreaded operation was avoided, and Mrs Rutnam was able to move her daughter to Los Angeles where she had a married son living with his American wife. Mr Rutnam sent the Conway letters to Farmington as a gift and asked me to let Mrs Rutnam have whatever I thought they were worth; he would reimburse me when he could. I couldn't let him do that, so a check went to Mrs Rutnam, the daughter recovered, and Mrs Rutnam returned to Ceylon. But after a short illness she died, "leaving a message to inform Dr Lewis specially." Her heart-broken husband sent me a copy of the letter of condolence from the Prime Minister, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and the press notices about Mrs Rutnam. Among them was, "Evelyn Rutnam, who moved unobtrusively in every circle, never losing the common touch, presided at a home at Cinnamon Gardens, Colombo, which was known to her friends as Freedom Hall where the white and the black, the brown and the yellow, the high and the low, the pious and impious, the gay and the reserved, the loyalist and the rebel, all met on a footing of equality and broke bread together."

Conway lived to 1795; his rescued letters to Walpole come down only to 1759. Where are the remainder? Perhaps they are in an undiscovered branch of the Campbell Johnston family; perhaps they have wandered off into quite a different family and are lying forgotten in a box or cupboard awaiting the arrival of the next searcher of Walpoliana from, it is to be hoped, the Lewis Walpole Library at Farmington. Meanwhile, Conway hangs in our long hall opposite his relations, Sir Robert Walpole and his first wife (Conway's aunt), Lady Mary Churchill with her husband and eldest son, Dorothy Clement, Princess Sophia of Gloucester, and the Allan Ramsay of Horace Walpole.