

Viewpoint

Dead Flies, Dust and Tax Demands

Hugh Buchanan

For some years I have been painting watercolours of books and libraries. I decided in 2010 to pursue this theme with an exhibition of archive paintings. But it was by no means such a straightforward project. Where was I to find something atmospheric? Something that evoked the pathos of age, the melancholy and the drama that I required. I had in my mind images from Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Cobwebbed piles of vellum flax and calfskin, 'heavy', as Peake has it, 'with a cold weight of ink'. I wanted rolls and charters and accumulations of dust. I wanted to be led up dim stairs to an ancient scriptorium beneath moth-hung rafters by Sepulchrove, Lord of Half-light. All I got was the hum of neon tubes and sterile Dexion shelving.

I had tried all the major universities and colleges but their collections had been sorted into boxes years ago and displayed none of the romantic disorder I required. This is, of course, perfectly understandable and as someone who has used archives for research purposes, nobody appreciates more than I the brisk efficiency of the porters and their well-organised storage systems.

However, there is a danger that all conservationists know well, and it is this – taking Oscar Wilde's lines completely out of context – that 'each man kills the thing he loves'. That is to say, by trying to organise beauty we never improve it. By restoring that picturesque derelict cottage we inevitably destroy those elements that made it picturesque in the first place: the tree growing out of the chimney, the lichen-covered walls. Once a dusty archive has been catalogued, tidied and stowed away in plastic crates it no longer evokes the fragile beauty that made it so visually appealing in the first place. For archivists it must be a bitter-sweet sensation. Most of the major country houses have gone down the same route and tell the same story. However, nestling, immense, four-square and dull red, deep among the green Dumfriesshire hills, was a rare exception and one that was to prove a fertile environment for my work. Drumlanrig.

'I'm afraid it's very boring really,' said my host, Richard, a far from sepulchral Duke of Buccleuch, as I trudged like David Balfour in *Kidnapped* behind him up endless flights of stairs to the fireproofed vaulted chamber at the top of the castle. 'It's full of dead flies and junk,' he added. And at first sight the room was not very prepossessing. A single window to the west revealed a watery September sun. Brushing aside the cobwebs I could glimpse late-season visitors in brightly coloured rainwear dodging the showers among the

yew hedges far below. In the distance a green tractor ploughed a hillside. A couple of old tables in the centre of the room were scattered with Edwardian photograph albums, broken vases and other things put aside for mending. But lining the walls were full-length, dark oak cupboards with large fielded panels. Pushing the tables slightly to one side we could open some of the doors. Within each cupboard were half a dozen deep square drawers, each one packed with documents. A burst of raking sunlight suddenly caught the faded yellow ochre bundles tied with pink tape, and the greasy scrolls with wax seals, straight from an illustration of a pirate's chest, were thrown into sharp focus. Each one was carefully numbered and catalogued but in the most picturesque disarray. Closer inspection revealed the names, villages and farms on the rental agreements and inventories. Gray, Lawrie and Turnbull. Durisdeer and Sanquhar. The man ploughing that distant hillside in his John Deere tractor must be one of their descendants. The dates on the documents sent a shiver down the spine. 1679. 1680. 1685. This was the time of the Covenanting wars and Dumfriesshire was at the very centre of the struggle. Were that tractor driver's forebears the hunters or the hunted? Does he know? Does he care? Perhaps not, but his grandchildren might and with any luck those documents will still be there behind those seventeenth-century plaited iron fire doors in 50 years' time for them to find out (Plates 1–3).

This for me is the value of the *in situ* archive. Not only are the accumulations of documents works of art in themselves but one gets a sense of people's changing priorities throughout the ages. People who breathed the same air, watched the same cloud shadows and worked the same land but came to very different ideological conclusions. These huge collections of apparently mundane rental and tenancy agreements were turned by the poor drudges who drafted them into objects of exquisite beauty, not only making their own existence tolerably creative but revealing at the same time all that we know of the lives of ordinary people. It is paradoxically here in the bowels or garrets of great houses, in those visceral bundles of greasy vellum, that we learn something of the common man.

It is also through the intimacies of handwritten letters that we come as close as we can to historical figures. As I discovered when recently working in the John Murray Archive, Byron's drunken scrawl and Mary Shelley's neat copperplate reveal so much of their characters. Even ordinary letters, whether moving and funny or ineffably sad, offer a form of immortality. In terms of sheer quantity just look at Forchtenstein, south of Vienna. Nobody is going to forget the Esterhazy family with their twelve miles of archives stored in 25 vaulted chambers in the basement of their ancient fortress.

Ever since I had turned my back on modernism in my final year at Edinburgh Art College in 1981, I had immersed myself in the Antique. I knew I had nothing to contribute to the self-generating turmoil of the contemporary art world. If I was to create anything worthwhile it had to come from a very different direction. The year 1981 was famous for another event: the wedding of the Prince and Princess of Wales, and the City of Edinburgh gave them a

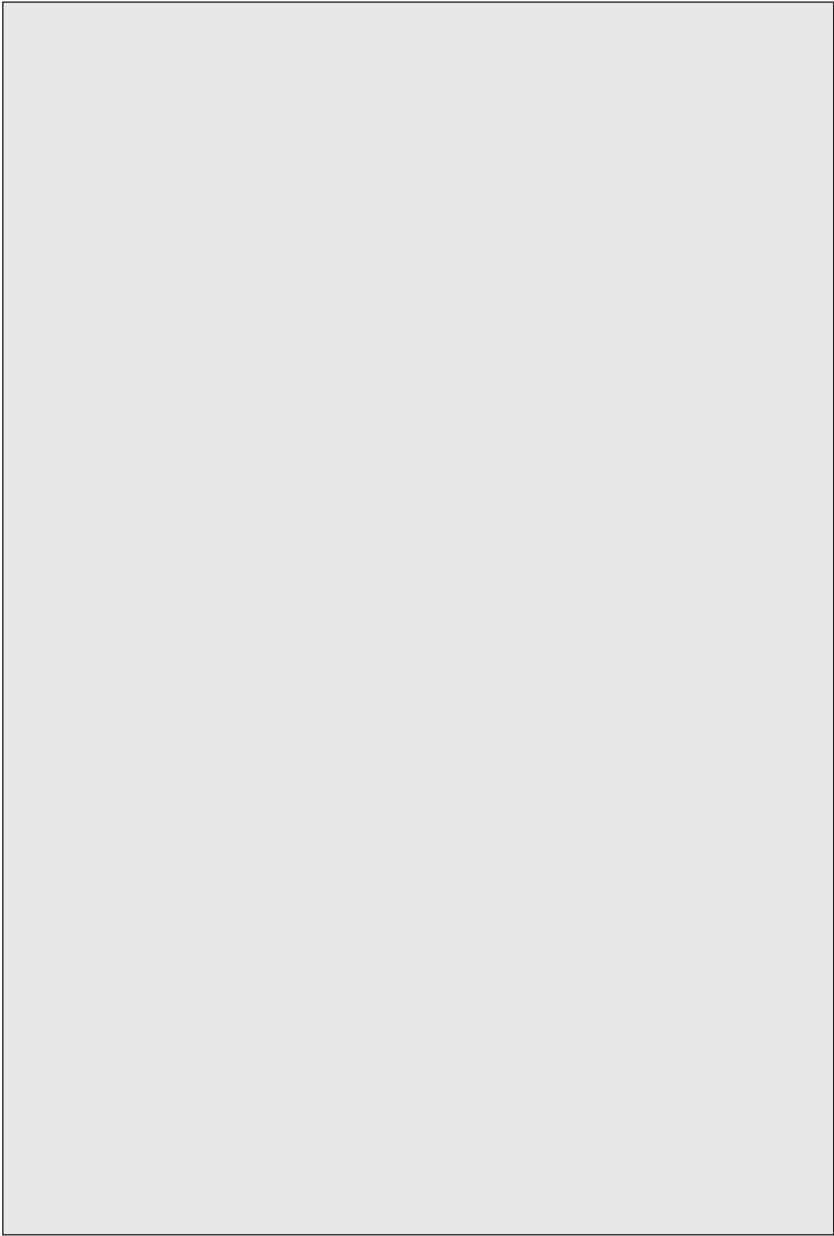


Plate 1 *Dead Flies, Dust and Tax Demands.* © Hugh Buchanan.

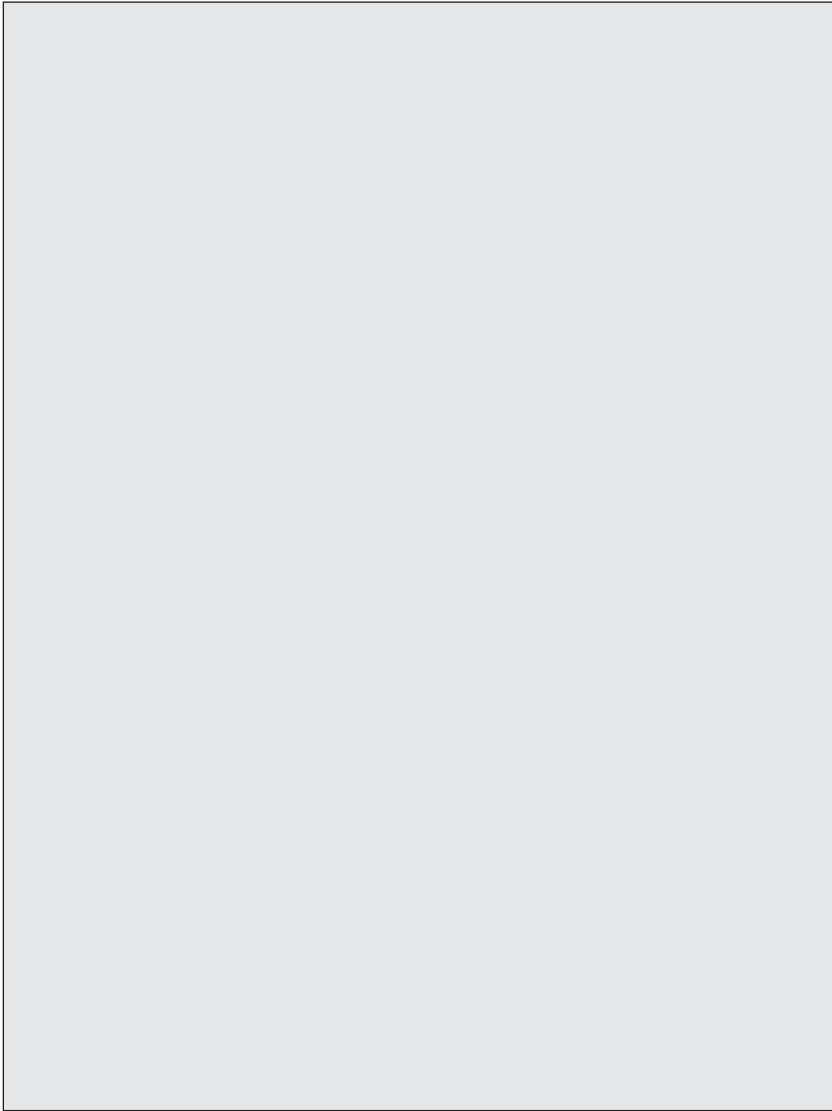


Plate 2 *Deed Boxes at Drumlanrig II.* © Hugh Buchanan.

picture of the gates of Hopetoun House from my degree show. For a young artist who had hitherto floundered around with pretentious abstract paintings in the style of Cy Twombly, this was a turning point. From then on I concentrated on interiors of historic houses, principally those of the National Trust.

There being so few other people working in this field, many of my principal influences were films: the work of Peter Greenaway (*The Draughtsman's Contract*); Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*; Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni*; and the ITV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited* whereby I inevitably invited comparison with Charles Ryder. Although technically speaking my influences were Melville and Cotman, Michael Andrews and John Piper, in a broader sense I see comparisons in my own work to that of Jane Austen. Like her I have set myself a limited canvas – a hermetic environment but one which has many layers. As a teenager I had been badly injured in a fire and had been obliged to stay inside out of the sun, consequently the shade of interiors, and later archives and libraries, became peculiarly attractive to me.

It was the textures and drama of the Baroque that first held my fascination – whether to be found in a Bavarian chapel, Edinburgh library or country house drawing room. Now, to some ears that may sound elitist and reactionary but I had grown up in the 1970s, an era where the failure of modernism was very apparent and most obviously manifested in Edinburgh by the ugliness of the St James's Centre and the Appleton Tower. There was a small group of architects and artists in Edinburgh at that time who passionately believed in applying the design values of the past to contemporary practice, as part of a process of reinventing classic and vernacular forms. We felt that it was the imposition of brutalism on a long-suffering and reluctant public that was the real elitism. We believed that not only the rich should have access to classical formality.

The City of Edinburgh itself was our exemplar. The perfect manifestation of the democratic grandeur we sought. While the agents of official culture endlessly eulogised the cutting edge in both art and architecture, and the *bien pensant* followed behind paying lip service, we could sense that it was not what ordinary people really wanted. Having been denied mainstream accessible art they bought Jack Vettriano instead, and it was always noticeable that when commissioned to portray Edinburgh for tourist posters, photographers strained every muscle to avoid, in their panoramas, the *modernist interventions* that those agents of official culture so publicly praised. And what does this have to do with archives? A great deal. It is all about attitudes to, and respect for, our heritage.

Generally speaking I concur with the views of the sculptor Sandy Stoddart: that is to say that in order to move forward – in a rowing boat at least – one has to look back. Artists had formerly always done this. The synthesis and adaptation of old ideas with new techniques or new ways of looking gives us the art. Those that attempt to predict the future inevitably look foolish. In his otherwise admirable 1982 film *Blade Runner*, Ridley Scott envisaged a future where the population of Los Angeles buzzed around the urban environment in little airborne bubble cars. But when they needed to make a telephone call they

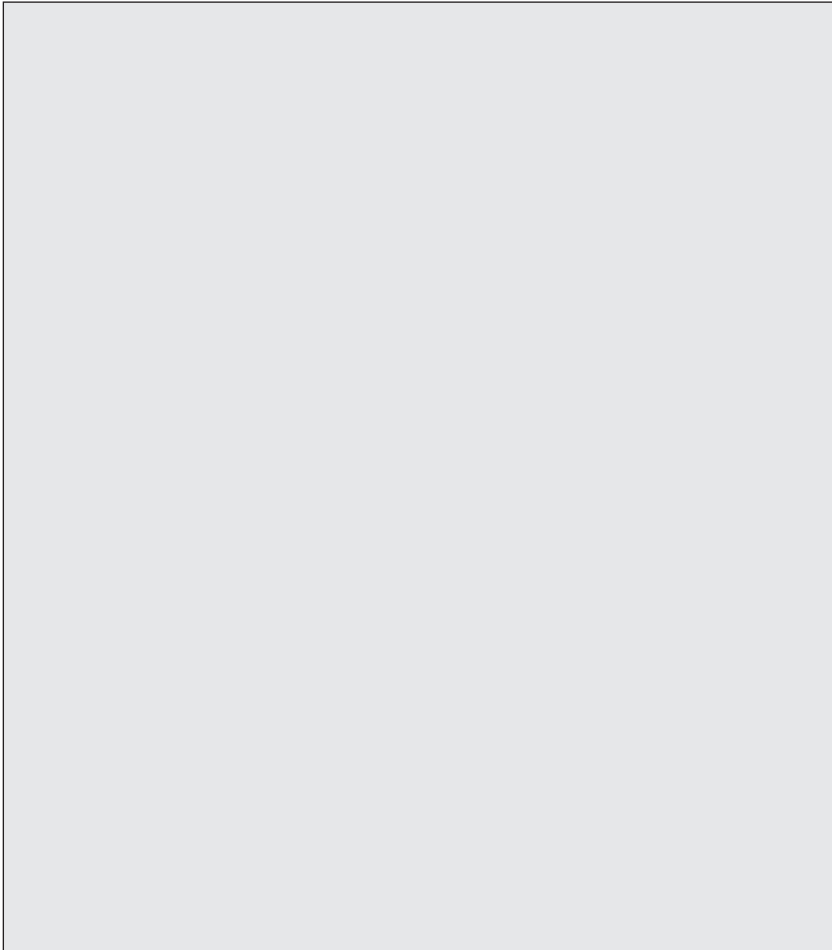


Plate 3 *Accounts with Marbled Jotter.* © Hugh Buchanan.

had to land and find a call box. He completely failed to anticipate the mobile phone, commercially available the next year in 1983. How wrong can you be? It became clear to me that the best art, most especially that of Ian Hamilton Finlay, reinterpreted the past and, in that way, spoke to the future. Of course it is inevitable that we always view the past through a contemporary prism. Piranesi saw it as one of Tiepolo's gods; David saw it as a Republican. Peter Greenaway saw it in *The Draughtsman's Contract* through the lens of late seventies disco as did Shaffer and Forman in *Amadeus*. So inevitably both of those films have more in common with *Saturday Night Fever* than eighteenth-century Salzburg or Kent. Herzog viewed his *conquistadores* through a sort of deranged Baader–Meinhof aesthetic so that his work has more in common with a John le Carré novel than Cortés. So, we look to the past to reinforce current values. Today, the past is generally seen through a prism of irony and paradox. How else can one explain the appointment by the Royal Academy of a Professor of Drawing – Tracey Emin – who by her own admission cannot draw?

In historical fiction, applying the values of the current age to the past is often a weakness. But in visual art it can be a strength. Cornelia Parker's squashed trombones in the V&A make patterns of the past, reducing things which once had an entirely different function into a decorative scheme, but a scheme which nonetheless has pathos and beauty. I am no different in the way that I arrange my bundles of documents, subscribing as I do to the same sort of aesthetic.

And so what have I achieved over the last five years? Well, that is for others to judge, but what I can say for certain is that I've learned to describe the essential qualities of torn and marbled paper, bruised and dirty vellum, greasy parchment, calligraphy and string, as well as the brittle qualities of sealing wax and the play of light across all those varied and fragile surfaces. Why I have chosen to work in watercolour? Well, how better to describe paper than with paper itself.

I've been welcomed in universities and libraries from Rome to Aberdeen. And made many friends in the world of books and archives, particularly among that dedicated band of bibliophiles, The Roxburghe Club. I have always been interested in the nexus between literature and art, and have even been instrumental in an archival discovery. Only last week while working with David McClay on the Ettrick Shepherd's correspondence in the John Murray Archive, deep within the bowels of the National Library in Edinburgh, we noticed that while Hogg's letters bore a red seal decorated with a Grecian lyre, one of the letters from Murray to Hogg bore a large black seal like an old toffee. Curious as to its significance we put it under a strong lens and found it to be a unique impression of Hogg and Murray's mutual friend, Lord Byron. Close inspection of Hogg's seal revealed a motto laden with defiance. He declared himself to his sophisticated friends, in barely legible relief, to be *naturae donum* – a gift of nature. Such are the unexpected pleasures of the world of archives.