January 2015

# Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

## *John Carlyle and the Scots in Colonial America*

***By John Wilson***

**Introduction:** John Carlyle was born to Rachel Murray Carlyle and William Carlyle in 1720. His family had a long and distinguished heritage of Scottish ancestors. He could trace the Carlyle lineage back to Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland in the 14th century, whose sister, Lady Margaret, married a William Carlyle. It is surmised, based on John Carlyle's oft-times phonetic spelling in his letters, that he spoke with a low-land Scottish accent [1]. He was one of many merchants of Scottish heritage that were active in commerce and in public life in English Colonial America, especially in the Middle Atlantic colonies.

Robert the Bruce

This article discusses the Scottish related context of the life and times of John Carlyle. It provides background on the formation of Britain and the entry of Scottish merchants into the predominately English Colonies; describes Scottish commercial dealings; and the impact of, and reactions to, Scottish merchants in Colonial America. The reader should be aware of the author's own Scottish heritage, being a first generation son of Scottish immigrants. However, consistent with an old Scottish saying, please be assured that, with regard to all things Scottish:

***He [the author] would never lie but when the holly is green.***

**Birth of Britain and Scottish Nationalism:** Britain as a national entity was born in 1707, as a result of the Act of Union being signed by the Scottish and English parliaments. Prior to 1707 Scotland was an independent country but one that in the early 1700's actually shared a common monarch with England. There had been several attempts at unification throughout the 17th century but none came to fruition. In the early 1700's, each country had its own reasons for seeking unification. England wanted a guarantee that a member of the current Hanoverian dynasty would succeed Queen Anne to the Scottish crown. The English wanted to ensure that Scotland would not choose a monarch separate from the one on the English throne. By the early 1700's, Scotland was suffering economically, having had a number of poor harvests in the 1690's; was blocked in exporting products to England; and had made a very expensive and disastrous attempt at colonization in Central America – the Darien scheme. In Scotland, the union was sought as a way to enable Scotland to recover economically through English assistance. In addition to immediate financial assistance, Scotland wanted a guarantee of access to colonial markets, in the hope that they would be placed on an equal footing in terms of trade. So in 1707, Britain was born. One might think that this birth, having taken place well over 300 years ago, could today be regarded as an old and almost forgotten memory. Not so, and certainly not in 2014. Throughout the summer of 2014 there was an intense and wide ranging debate about Scotland's British identity, culminating in a nationwide referendum in Scotland on September 18th, to decide if Scotland would dissolve the Act of Union and again become an independent country. The majority of Scots ultimately decided that it was "better together". However, the extensive, heated national debate and referendum, in which there was 85% voter

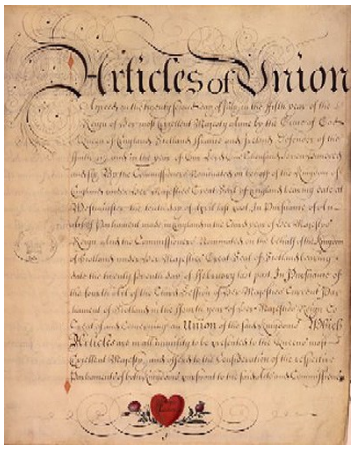
**CARLYLE HOUSE**
*Susan Hellman, Site Administrator*
*Helen Wirka, Site Specialist*
*Vanessa Herndon, Education Assistant*

participation, serves to highlight the strong passions and continuing tensions within the British body politic about national and ethnic Scottish and English identities. Although the majority decided that Scotland should stay British, it is evident that Scottish nationalism is alive today. As Sir Walter Scott so aptly said:

> ***Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,***
> ***Who never to himself hath said,***
> ***'This is my own, my native land! …***
> ***If such there breathe, go, mark him well;***
> ***For him no Minstrel raptures swell;***
> ***…***
> ***Living, he forfeits fair renown,***
> ***And, doubly dying, shall go down***
> ***To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,***
> ***Unwept, unhonoured, and unsung***

Prior to 1707 Scotland was an independent country which often fought against England. Although Scotland could trade with England, it was completely shut out from commerce with any of the English colonies. The Act of Union of 1707 created the greatest free trade area in the world at that time. After the union of Scotland and England all restrictions on trade and settlement within the English colonies were lifted and Scottish commercial activities grew rapidly throughout the 18th century. Scots in substantial numbers began to leave their bankrupt land for the now open British – not just English – colonies in America. All Scots, English and Welch were now British. Thus all of the relatives comprising the entire Carlyle family, those living both north and south of the Scottish border, were now British and Scotland itself could be termed Northern Britain.

**Scottish Immigration and Influence: Action and Reaction in Colonial America.** Before 1700, as noted by Duncan Bruce [2], there were some but not very many Scots in America. During the early and mid 1700's, the Scots became the most numerous "foreigners" in some parts of America. "Their success was so rapid and disproportionate to their numbers that they were often regarded with suspicion, envy and even hatred". A few settled in New England but more went to the Mid Atlantic colonies. In Georgetown, then part of Maryland, most of the merchants were Scots. It was in Virginia however that the Scots were the most successful and the least liked. The Scots started in the Virginia tobacco trade later than the English, since they had been effectively barred from participating until the Act of Union of 1707. However, once in the business they quickly took much of the business away from the already established English traders. In many ways it was a typical immigrant story that we see even today – the newly arrived merchants worked harder and did things that the other already established traders would not do.



The Articles of Union with Scotland

Consignment had been the predominant method English merchants used for moving tobacco to market in the English colonies up until the early 1700's. In the consignment system, the merchant did not directly buy or acquire title to the tobacco but handled shipping and made arrangements to sell it to someone else. With the entry of Scottish merchants, the direct purchase method which involved the merchants acquiring title to the tobacco grew in importance. Direct purchase involved greater risks for the merchants but the Scottish merchants had several advantages:

- -The ocean trade route from Virginia to Glasgow was safer and shorter than to London.
- -There were considerable financial resources for risk taking provided by Glasgow banks, which specialized in providing credit for the tobacco trade.
- -They achieved greater efficiency in lowering the cost of operations, particularly in reducing the turn around time for ships in Virginia.

The Scots also actively pursued the marketing of tobacco from the Piedmont region. As a result, Scotland's share of the tobacco trade grew from 10%

in 1738 to almost 52% in 1769. Not surprisingly, as the success of the Scottish merchants increased, the sentiment against them also increased. As noted by Andrew Hook [3], the Scots became "the most unpopular national group in the colonies". Complaints against the Scots included the allegation that they "never lost their clannish instincts, always sided together, supported each other and never really trusted anyone who was not a fellow countryman." Imagine that -- someone accusing the Scots of being clannish.

The success of the merchants, particularly that of the Scots, was criticized by the planters. In an open letter "To the Planters of Virginia", William Lee issued a manifesto in October of 1771 which summarized the views of the planters regarding the merchants. He viewed traders as "parasitic growth which fed on the honest labour of those engaged in production". In particular he characterized the Scottish merchants as

> *"something like the stinking and troublesome weed we call in Virginia, wild onion. Whenever one is permitted to root, the number soon increases so fast, that it is extremely difficult to eradicate them, and they poison the ground so that no wholesome plant can thrive "*

Perhaps William Lee really meant the Scottish Thistle.


King George III

Some Americans even blamed the repressive policies of King George III on the Scots, since many of his policies were administered by Scots. When the first draft of the Declaration of Independence was written in 1776, it contained a phrase that complained of the king sending "not only soldiers of our common blood but Scotch and foreign mercenaries." The phrase was lated deleted from the final version but its presence in the original draft is an indication of Scottish unpopularity in America during the Revolution.

**John Carlyle in Context**. John Carlyle was much more than just a merchant with Scottish roots. He was also himself a planter, who owned three plantations. He was nominated to serve in substantial ways in the founding and nuturing of the City of Alexandria and had important responsibilities in American patriotic affairs. In addition, he had married Sarah Fairfax, a daughter of one of the most prestigious and wealthiest English families in Virginia.

The author is not enough of a Carlyle scholar to pretend to know John Carlyle's feelings about Scottish nationalism and his attitude about the English. Some indication may be found in his writings about the reaction of the British troops to General Braddock's defeat [4],

> "… that they are determined to go into Winter Quarters in July..."

He then sarcastically notes in parenthesis "(brave English Men)."

Perhaps it is more instructive to understand how negatively many people in the Colonies viewed the Scots than it is to know how John Carlyle viewed the English. In that regard and in light of the anti-Scottish sentiments of that time, the many and varied accomplishments of John Carlyle are even more impressive.

**Acknowledgements:** Much of the material in this article is from the following sources:

1. *Col. John Carlyle, Gent*. by James D. Munson, North Virginia Regional Park Authority, 1986

*2. The Mark of the Scots* by Duncan Bruce, Citadel Press 1998

*3. Scotland and America* by Andrew Hook, Blackie & Sons, 1975

4. Alexandria, Virginia, Alexandria's Scottish Heritage, Jeremy J, Harvey on http://www.electricscotland.com/usa/alexandria/history.htm