

Neurotic Ulsterman gives rich slice of eighteenth century life

March 4 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- An investigation into the life of an obscure but energetic eighteenth century Ulsterman has provided a vivid insight into early Hanoverian Britain.

Among Sir James Caldwell's papers are letters from Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder, writer Dr. Samuel Johnson and famous actor David Garrick.

It is the culmination of 12 years of research by historical geographer Mervyn Busted, from The University of Manchester, into a little known archive entitled the Bagshawe Muniments.

The Muniments - kept at The University of Manchester's John Rylands Library - provide details of a bizarre sword duel fought between Sir James and an adversary behind closed doors in a Bath pub.

They describe an incident involving Caldwell which Mr. Busted thinks might have provided the inspiration for part of a historical novel by enigmatic author Patrick O'Brian.

The archives also contain an account by Caldwell of a 1763 session of the Irish parliament in a forerunner of Hansard.

Sir James risked fine or even imprisonment to write the volume known as "Caldwell's Debates", as some MPs saw such reports as a breach of parliamentary privilege.

“Sir James, who lived from 1720 to 1784, was a Protestant landowner whose family came to Ulster in the time of James 1.

“But their humble roots in trade meant he was very sensitive about status and desperate for a peerage: the duel illustrates just how paranoid and neurotic he was,” said Mr. Busteed.

“He was a loyal Protestant and believed in an exclusively Protestant constitution.

“But he was an innovative and fair landlord who looked after his Catholic tenants well.”

According to archive the duel took place after a lower ranking nobleman got up to dance before Sir James, a serious breach of etiquette in those days.

The hypersensitive Sir James challenged him and the result was the sword fight in which Sir James drew blood from his adversary.

“The duel had to be in private because by this time it was becoming less acceptable for arguments to be settled this way, especially in Bath where polite behaviour was very strictly enforced.

“Within 50 years the practice had almost completely died out in Britain,” explained Mr. Busteed.

Sir James can also claim to be one of a select and tiny group of Protestants accepted into the nobility of the Holy Roman Empire.

He was given the title of Count of Milan by the formidable Maria Theresa, Empress of Austria, who was so impressed she offered him the post of Chamberlain of the Imperial household.

But since only Catholics could hold the post Sir James had to decline.

In the Patrick O'Brian novel "Post Captain" there is an incident in which Stephen Maturin, Jack Aubrey's great friend and secretly a British spy, was detained in Toulon by the French who suspected him of espionage.

Maturin manages to talk his way to freedom but in an almost identical scenario, Sir James was arrested and detained for three weeks in Toulouse. Like Maturin, he convinced the French that he was a bird watcher and natural philosopher.

Mr Busteed said: "The similarities between the fictional and non fictional accounts always struck me as bizarre - and O'Brian's research for his writings was outstanding - did he consult these relatively obscure Bagshawe Muniments at John Rylands?"

THE LETTERS

From Prime Minister William Pitt the Elder:

Illustrated the Prime Minister's strategy in the Seven Years War, fought between 1756 - 1763 and involving most major European powers and their colonies.

Mr Busteed said: "Pitt's strategy was for British military effort to focus on naval and colonial warfare overseas while Britain's ally Prussia took on France.

"What is interesting is how Pitt flatters Sir James. He was obviously grateful to Caldwell for raising and equipping a regiment out of his own pocket."

From Dr Samuel Johnson:

An account of an interview in 1767 between Johnson and King George III. The Garrick letter gave a polite refusal to Caldwell's request for him to put on a play at the Caldwell Fermanagh home.

Mr Busted said: "Going by the tone of the latter from Garrick, it appears as though the famous actor used his wife as an excuse by claiming she could not face a voyage on the Irish Sea - though I suspect it was really Garrick who didn't fancy the trip to such a remote place."

Notes

Several Caldwells served in the British army - one was an aide to General Wolfe and was wounded at Quebec and John, Sir James' son and heir, served in the American War of Independence as liaison with the native American tribes allied to the British.

A later Caldwell generation founded the famous Belleek Pottery Company in 1858 as a relief measure for locals impoverished by the famine of 1845-52.

A chapter on Sir James Caldwell's life written by Mervyn Busted appears in: "Irish protestant Identities" edited by Mervyn Busted, Frank Neal and John Tonge. It was published by Manchester University Press.

Provided by University of Manchester

Citation: Neurotic Ulsterman gives rich slice of eighteenth century life (2009, March 4) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-neurotic-ulsterman-rich-slice-eighteenth.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is

provided for information purposes only.