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978-1-108-07391-2 - A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence
of the Late John Murray, with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the House,
1768–1843: Volume 1

Samuel Smiles

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS OF JOHN MURRAY.

CHAPTER I.

JOHN MACMURRAY OR MURRAY.

THE publishing house of Murray dates from the year 1768, in which year John MacMurray, a lieutenant of Marines, having retired from the service on half-pay, purchased the bookselling business of William Sandby, at the sign of the 'Ship,' No. 32, Fleet Street, opposite St. Dunstan's Church. Mr. Sandby afterwards became a banker in the old established firm of Snow and Co., in the Strand.

John MacMurray was descended from the Murrays of Athol. His uncle, Colonel Murray, was "out" in the rising of 1715, under the Earl of Mar; served under the Marquis of Tullibardine, the son of his chief, the Duke of Athol, and led a regiment in the abortive fight of Sheriffmuir. After the rebellion against the Hanoverian dynasty had been suppressed, Colonel Murray retired to France, where he served under the exiled Duke of Ormonde, who had attached himself to the Stuart Court.

The Colonel's brother Robert followed a safer course. He prefixed the "Mac" to his name; settled in Edinburgh; adopted the law as a profession, and became a writer to the Signet. He had a family of three daughters,

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Catherine, Robina, and Mary Anne ; and two sons, Andrew and John. Of the two sons, Andrew, the elder, took Orders. He first officiated at Kirkcaldy, and afterwards at Duffus, near Elgin, where he died. In 1780, we find Mr. John Murray writing to the widow at Duffus, condoling with her on a double sorrow—the death of her husband, and the capture of her son Archie, who had been captured by the Spaniards while on his voyage to India.

John, the younger of Robert McMurray's sons, was born at Edinburgh in 1745. After receiving a good general education, he entered the Royal Marines under the special patronage of Sir George Yonge, Bart.,* a well-known official of the last century, and his commission as second lieutenant was dated the 24th of June, 1762. At that time England was at war with France and Austria. Pitt, Earl of Chatham, was Secretary of State and virtually Prime Minister, but Pitt resigned in 1762, and Lord Bute succeeded him. Bute's thoughts were constantly directed towards peace ; and the "Seven Years' War," as it was called, came to an end with the treaty of Paris in 1763. There was now little for the English Navy to do. Most of the war ships were laid up in ordinary ; the seamen were discharged, and the Marines took up quarters in their respective barracks.

Young MacMurray was quartered at Chatham. In the *Army List* for 1768 he was registered as second lieutenant on full pay ; and in point of seniority he was No. 34 on the list. Six years had come and gone since the Treaty of Paris had been concluded, and still he remained in the same rank as before. The monotony of this life to a young man of an active and energetic temperament

* Sir George Yonge was Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, and subsequently Secretary at War ; he died in 1812.

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became almost intolerable. At length he contemplated making a sudden change. He would retire on half-pay at the age of twenty-three, and become a London book-seller!

It is not improbable that he was induced to embark on his proposed enterprise by his recent marriage with Nancy Wemyss, daughter of Captain Wemyss, then residing at Brompton, near Chatham. Young MacMurray must have married for love and not for money, as Captain Wemyss was quite unable to assist his son-in-law with capital for his new undertaking. The captain was laid up in ordinary, like his ship, and was a victim to gout and chalk-stones.*

While residing at Chatham, MacMurray renewed his acquaintance with William Falconer, the poet, who, like himself, was a native of Edinburgh. Falconer had been for a long time engaged in the merchant service, but in 1762, through the patronage of the Duke of York, to whom he had dedicated his poem "The Shipwreck," he obtained the rank of midshipman in the Royal Navy. After the termination of the war with France in that year his ship was laid up in ordinary at Chatham; and then he fell in with his old Edinburgh friend John MacMurray, and to relieve his weary hours, began the preparation of his well-known 'Universal Marine Dictionary.'

When the work had been completed, and while it was still in the hands of the publisher, Falconer accepted the

* In one of Captain Wemyss's letters to Mr. MacMurray (23 Aug., 1765) he said: "If ever you come to where I am, you will almost see the devil upon two sticks. I can just make a shift at present to go down to dock and up again; afterwards to my couch like all other animals. My middle finger has altered its position from Dunnose Point to the exact make and form of Lyons Rump at the Cape of Good Hope. I save all the chalk that comes out of it, and will send it on a venture to Maryland, where the article is a scarce commodity."

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position of purser of the *Aurora* frigate, ordered to proceed to India. In addition to this office he was appointed private secretary to Messrs. Vansittart, Scrofton and Forde, who were proceeding to India in the *Aurora*, to supervise the affairs of the East India Company. The ship was already at Dover, with Falconer on board, when he received the following letter from Lieutenant MacMurray, at Brompton, in which he offered to take him as a partner in the business he was about to commence. The letter is worthy of being quoted, as showing the preliminaries of the establishment of the publishing house of Murray.

Lieutenant MacMurray to Mr. William Falconer, now at Dover.

Brompton, Kent, October 16th, 1768.

DEAR WILL,

Since I saw you, I have had the intention of embarking in a scheme that I think will prove successful, and in the progress of which I had an eye towards your participating. Mr. Sandby, Bookseller, opposite St. Dunstan's Church, Fleet Street, has entered into company with Snow and Denne, Bankers. I was introduced to this gentleman about a week ago, upon an advantageous offer of succeeding him in his old business; which, by the advice of my friends, I propose to accept. Now, although I have little reason to fear success by myself in this undertaking, yet I think so many additional advantages would accrue to us both, were your forces and mine joined, that I cannot help mentioning it to you, and making you the offer of entering into company.

He resigns to me the lease of the house, the goodwill &c.; and I only take his bound stock, and fixtures, at a fair appraisement, which will not amount to much beyond £400, and which, if ever I mean to part with, cannot fail to bring in nearly the same sum. The shop has been long established in the Trade; it retains a good many old customers; and I am to be ushered immediately into public notice by the sale of a new edition of 'Lord

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Lyttelton's Dialogues ;' and afterwards by a like edition of his 'History.' These Works I shall sell by commission, upon a certain profit, without risque ; and Mr. Sandby has promised to continue to me, always, his good offices and recommendations.

These are the general outlines ; and if you entertain a notion that the conjunction will suit you, advise me, and you shall be assumed upon equal terms ; for I write to you before the affair is finally settled ; not that I shall refuse it if you don't concur (for I am determined on the trial by myself) ; but that I think it will turn out better were we joined ; and this consideration alone prompts me to write to you. Many Blockheads in the Trade are making fortunes ; and did we not succeed as well as they, I think it must be imputed only to ourselves. Make Mrs. McMurray's compliments and mine to Mrs. Falconer ; we hope she has reaped much benefit from the saltwater bath. Consider what I have proposed ; and send me your answer soon. Be assured in the meantime, that I remain, Dear Sir,

Your affectionate and humble servant,

JOHN MCMURRAY.

P.S.—My advisers and directors in this affair have been Thomas Cumming, Esq., Mr. Archibald Paxton, Mr. James Paterson of Essex House, and Messrs. J. and W. Richardson, Printers. These, after deliberate reflection, have unanimously thought that I should accept Mr. Sandby's offer.

Falconer's answer to this letter has not been preserved. Perhaps he refused MacMurray's offer, being already provided, as he thought, with a certain income. At all events, he sailed from Dover in the *Aurora* frigate. The vessel touched at the Cape ; set sail again, and was never afterwards heard of. It is supposed that she was either burnt at sea, or driven northward by a storm and wrecked on the Madagascar coast. Falconer intended to have prefixed some complimentary lines to Mr. Murray to the third

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edition of 'The Shipwreck,' but they were omitted in the hurry of leaving London and England for India. The 'Universal Marine Dictionary' was published by Millar at the end of 1769; and it is pleasant to have to relate of that gentleman, that he generously bestowed upon Falconer's widow many sums not stipulated for in his contract with the author.

Notwithstanding the failure of MacMurray to obtain the aid of Falconer in his partnership, he completed alone his contract with Mr. Sandby. His father at Edinburgh supplied him with the necessary capital, and he began the bookselling business in November 1768. He dropped the prefix "Mac" from his surname; put a ship in full sail at the head of his invoices; and announced himself to the public in the following terms:

"John Murray (successor to Mr. Sandby), Bookseller and Stationer, at No. 32, over against St. Dunstan's Church, in Fleet Street, London, sells all new Books and Publications. Fits up Public or Private Libraries in the neatest manner with Books of the choicest Editions, the best Print, and the richest Bindings. Also, executes East India or foreign Commissions by an assortment of Books and Stationary suited to the Market or Purpose for which it is destined; all at the most reasonable rates."

Among the first books he issued were new editions of Lord Lyttelton's 'Dialogues of the Dead,' and of his 'History of King Henry the Second,' in stately quarto volumes, as well as of Walpole's 'Castle of Otranto.' He was well supported by his friends, and especially by his old brother officers, and we find many letters from all parts of the world requesting him to send consignments of books and magazines, the choice of which was, in many cases left entirely to his own discretion. In 1769 he received a letter from General Sir Robert Gordon, then in India, who

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informed him that he had recommended him to many of his comrades.

Sir R. Gordon to John Murray.

“Brigadier-General Wedderburn has not forgotten his old school-fellow, J. McMurray. Send me British news, and inform me of all political and other affairs at home.” [He also added that Colonel Mackenzie, another old friend, is to be his patron.] “I hope,” says Sir R. Gordon, in another letter, “that you find more profit and pleasure from your new employment than from that of the sword, which latter, you may remember, I endeavoured to dissuade you from returning to ; but a little trial, and some further experience, at your time of life, cannot hurt you. . . . My best compliments to Mrs. Murray, who I suppose will not be sorry for your laying aside the wild Highland ‘Mac’ as unfashionable and even dangerous in the circuit of Wilkes’s mob ; but that, I am convinced, was your smallest consideration.”

The friendship of Falconer with MacMurray was instrumental in introducing the new bookseller to several distinguished authors. John Cartwright, afterwards Major, when on board H.M.S. *Wasp*, made the acquaintance of Falconer, and through him of MacMurray and others. It was no doubt through the recommendation of John Cartwright that his brother, the Rev. Dr. Cartwright, then of Marnham, near Tuxford, published through Murray, in 1770, his legendary tale of ‘Armine and Elvira.’ The poem was greatly admired, and went through seven editions in little more than a year. Before it came out, however, Dr. Cartwright was very apprehensive as to its fate.

Dr. Cartwright to John Murray.

“I shall be glad to know what is said of it. You will excuse the trouble I give you in this affair, especially when you consider the paternal anxiety that a man must unavoidably feel for the first brat that he publicly owns. I

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forgot to write to Taylor [the printer], as I mentioned in my last, the alteration I wanted him to make was about the head and hair of the lover; as it is at present, he looks more like a Butcher's boy than the son of an Earl in disguise."

Dr. Cartwright, however, was much more distinguished as an inventor than as a poet. In the letter from which the above extract is made he asks Mr. Murray to go and see in Soho a machine, which he describes. He must already have been thinking of his great invention. In 1785, he took out his patent for a Power Loom, which, together with the Steam Engine of James Watt, has done so much to establish the manufacturing supremacy of Great Britain.

Dr. Cartwright having begun his academical studies at University College, Oxford, under the private tuition of Dr. John Langhorne, it was natural that Langhorne, when he had completed his translation from the French of the 'Fables of Florian,' should desire to publish the work through Mr. Murray, who had been so successful with the legendary tale of his pupil. More notable, however, was Langhorne's translation of 'Plutarch's Lives,' also published by Murray, which superseded North's translation from the French of Amyot, and eventually became a standard work.

Shortly after Mr. Murray began business, he became straitened for money. The nature of his business, and especially his consignments to distant lands, rendered it necessary for him to give long credit, while the expense and the risk of bringing out new books, added a fresh strain on his resources. In these circumstances, he applied to his friend Mr. William Kerr, Surveyor of the General Post Office for Scotland, for a loan. Mr. Kerr responded

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THOMAS CUMMING.

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in a kindly letter. Though he could not lend much at the time, he sent Mr. Murray £150, “lest he might be prejudiced for want of it.” Mr. Kerr also sent some advice, which he thought might be useful for the young married couple.

Mr. Wm. Kerr to John Murray.

“Conduct your business with activity, industry, and unremitting attention, without being irritated or vexed by unavoidable accidents or incidents.” [He also urged the necessity of domestic economy.] “You should know what the expense of your family is, once every week. That will be the key to you in most of your other expenses. If, in the course of my travels, any such thing as an author of repute should fall in my way, I will recommend him to you. Everything helps. I am glad you are established upon half-pay. That is always a sure little card, whatever happens.”

In order to extend his business to better advantage, Mr. Murray endeavoured to form connections with booksellers in Ireland and Scotland. He employed Thomas Cumming, a Quaker mentioned in Boswell’s ‘Life of Johnson,’ who had been one of his advisers as to the purchase of Mr. Sandby’s business, to push the trade in Ireland. In 1769 Cumming went to Dublin to take up an official position. While there, he endeavoured to promote his friend’s bookselling connection.

Mr. T. Cumming to John Murray.

“On receipt of thine I constantly applied to Alderman Faulkener, and showed him the first Fable of Florian, but he told me that he would not give a shilling for any original copy whatever, as there is no law or even custom to secure any property in books in this kingdom [Ireland]. From him, I went directly to Smith and afterwards to Bradley, &c. They all gave me the same answer . . . Sorry, and very sorry I am, that I cannot send a better account of the first commission thou hast favoured me with here. Thou may’st believe that I set about it with a perfect zeal,

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not lessened from the consideration of the troubles thou hast on my account, and the favours I so constantly receive from thee; nor certainly that my good friend Dr. Langhorne was not altogether out of the question. None of the trade here will transport books at their own risque. This is not a reading, but a hard-drinking city; 200 or 250 are as many as a bookseller, except it be an extraordinary work indeed, ever throws off at an impression."

He, however, seems to have been more fortunate with the bookseller Ewing, who gave twenty guineas for the right of republishing the 'Florian' in Dublin, as well as for another book—both translations from the French.

In 1770, Mr. Murray made the acquaintance of Professor John Millar of Glasgow, and of the Rev. John Whitaker of Manchester. When Mr. Millar was appointed Professor of Law in 1761, the students attending his class seldom amounted to more than four or five, but, by a popular and incisive style of lecturing, he eventually created an extensive interest in the subject, and his class-room became filled with eager students. Among his pupils were Lord Jeffrey, Lord Adam, and the Earl of Lauderdale. The Professor was first introduced to Mr. Murray by Dr. Moore, father of Sir John Moore, who fell at Corunna. In his letter to the publisher he said that the MS. of Professor Millar's work had been read and revised by David Hume and Dr. Robison of Edinburgh, and that they much approved of it and recommended its publication. Mr. Murray was inclined to comply with their request, and eventually accepted the work, giving the author 100 guineas for the first edition. It was entitled 'Observations concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society.'

Before the work appeared there was some correspondence between the publisher and the author about a Preface. Murray wished one to appear, but Millar at first declined.