

A YOUTH AT OXFORD AS ILLUSTRATED

BY THE DUCIE CORRESPONDENCE

The bundle of letters consists of three to Richard Ducie while at school at Newport in Shropshire, and the remainder while he was at Queen's College, Oxford. Drafts of his replies to many of the letters are written on the unused space on the letters, and sometimes on other scraps of paper, and altogether give a fairly wide picture of the life of a young man at Oxford. The letters cover the period 1661 to 1669.

Richard's grandfather, Sir Robert Ducie (b.1575), was Sheriff of London in 1620 and Lord Mayor in 1631. He was an immensely wealthy man, and although he lost more than £80,000 as a result of being banker to Charles I, he is said to have died worth £400,000. Richard's father, Robert, was Sir Robert's fourth son, and had his estate at Little Aston in Staffordshire. He died when Richard was a young boy, and Richard's mother then married Thomas Joliffe, of Coston Hall, Worcestershire. The first three letters are from Richard's mother to him at school in Shropshire, but she died in 1663, when Richard was about 14 years old. Richard's elder brother Robert died in 1664, and Richard and his sister Elizabeth, a year or two his senior, were left in the care of their uncle, Sir William Ducie, 3rd Bt., Viscount Downe. Sir William was created a Knight of the Bath at the coronation of Charles II, and his wife Frances, was a member of the Seymour family.

The evidence of the letters is that both Sir William and his wife took their responsibilities seriously. Lady Frances is obviously very fond of Richard, but Sir William is rather pompous and much given to moralising. No doubt Richard's behaviour often warranted the long lectures he received from his uncle. Aunt Frances sends him gifts, and when he needs favours from Sir William, it is to Aunt Frances she writes first, so that she will present his case to Sir William. When he had been suffering from toothache she sent him a cure for his pain: "There is a gum called carrane, which spread on plasters and applied to the temple and behind the ears, is your Aunt Garret's infallible cure - it is troublesome pain - constant washing the mouth, temples and behind the ears with cold water every morning is the best remedy I know."

At first Richard and his sister were very close, but after her marriage to Edward Moreton, relations became strained, as her husband made several attempts to encroach on Richard's estate at Little Aston. He complained to his uncle, "Brother Moreton's intentions, now as they have ever been, are to get as much from me as he can." The reply is: "Anything fixed to the house, either with nail, screw, pins of iron and wood or mortar ... such are your fee simple." Also: "Write to Mr. Moreton or your sister

that you wonder at their dealings." He did write to his sister: "I am much troubled to hear that your husband should now renew his former unlawful dealings with me. I am sorry to find your husband's friendship to me to be nothing else but seeking his own advantage."

A major problem that emerges from the study of these letters is the considerable difficulty encountered in forwarding letters and packages, especially to places other than the main cities. Many of the letters contain instructions on how to send replies, and some examples are quoted. "Write by way of London, directing your letters to My Lady Seymour's in St. Martin's Lane, and writing upon the outside to be sent to Tortworth by the Gloucestershire carrier, who lies at the Three Cups in St. John's Street." "Write to my lodging next door to the Lady Garret's in Kinge's Street in Coven Gardens." The above were in letters from Sir William, and Richard advises his tenant at Little Aston: "If you please you may send every month letters by John Finch, carrier, who calls at the Welsh Harp at Wolverhampton." Aunt Frances writes: "I have sent you a pot of venison, red deer, the first killed this year. The carrier is paid for the carriage of your basket."

Letters were written on thick vellum-like paper, which was then folded and sealed, and the address and other instructions written on the outside of the letter. Naturally this part of the letter became stained, and the ink faded, but one letter is very clearly addressed. It is from Richard's sister

To Mr. Richard Ducie Att
Sir Will: Ducie his house
Tortworth near
Wooton-Underedge
With care and speed
Deliver Hast Hast
pd 3d.

The precariousness of the post provided Richard with a very ready excuse on numerous occasions when chided by his uncle for not replying promptly to letters.

The transfer of money presented a far more complicated problem than correspondence. There were no banks such as we know, and the letter carriers were not to be trusted with the delivery of money. As Richard's guardian, it was necessary for Sir William to forward sums of £20 at intervals for his "quartridge" at Oxford, and this was a quite complicated affair. It was necessary to arrange for the transfer of the money between a trusted banker or accountant in one town, usually London, and his representative

in Oxford. In one letter Sir William explains that he could either pay the money in London, upon receiving word from Richard that he had received the money in Oxford; or, he could pay the money first to a merchant in London, and when the Oxford representative of this merchant was notified of the payment, then he would pay the money to Richard. Again, some of these representatives appear to have been rather dilatory in paying out the money, probably making a small profit by this delay. In one letter Richard asks that his money be paid according to a note or receipt from a manciple (a college servant), "whom I have thus formerly used, and require him to pay me the full sum upon sight, for he is somewhat backward in paying it." Even this cumbersome system was only effective between established centres, and when Sir William was in the country, he had problems: "I know not how to send £20 to you but by a messenger on purpose, which is somewhat hazardous, therefore I will send my man with two horses to Oxford to conduct you to Tortworth - he shall bring part of the money with him to you and the rest you shall receive at Tortworth." When Richard has to confess to having a number of accounts outstanding at the time he is to leave Oxford, his uncle advises him: "£100 to settle all bills, is a large amount. Find a substantial citizen of Oxford who has dealings and correspondence with London. Get him to give you a note in the form hereinlosed under his hand for £50 at a time. It is an inconvenience and vexation you cause me."

In the early 17th century, drunkenness, licentiousness and idleness were common at Oxford. When Laud, then Bishop of London, was elected Chancellor in 1630, he reformed the statutes of the university, having them adopted in 1636. The average age of undergraduates was about sixteen, and the tutor was expected to be guardian as well as instructor. Most of Sir William's letters contain some reference to Richard's behaviour, either upbraiding him or warning him against the temptations which surround him. When Richard went to visit his sister in Staffordshire his uncle advises him to put into practice the method of studying arithmetic and the Latin tongue which he had recommended, and to avoid vain and idle company by keeping at work, "without which you can never reap any benefit by your studies, which if you be truculent and disorderly will be a burden to you, and irksome and tedious, but being temperate and fastidious will be delightful." In a second letter at this time, his uncle advises: "I advise you to be sober and abstemious, and to take some pleasant Latin author with you to persue in the mornings and other leisurely times, that you may not forget what you have learnt at Oxford, but to improve your knowledge in the Latin tongue."

Sir William seems to have had a number of contacts, who were only too ready to report any of Richard's shortcomings to him.

"I have heard from Oxford, by several hands," he writes, "that you spend too much time and money in taverns and alehouses, in inferior company," and also that Richard has been drinking or was drunk when he visited his Aunt Seymour, "who was much scandalised thereat. Persons of honour and quality take it much to heart to hear such things of their relatives." Richard refutes such an accusation and says that when he visited his aunt, he was in the company of "a Master of Arts of our House, whose civility and sobriety is sufficiently known to the whole college." Usually Richard's replies to his uncle's accusations are extremely apologetic and courteous, no doubt due to his uncle's position as head of the family and holder of the pursestrings, and also to his social position. On one occasion however, Richard replies with some spirit, when confessing to outstanding debts, that although some were a result of lack of care, some of the money was spent for clothes "in some sort like my equals, which could not be supplied from my allowance." Sir William's concern cannot be dismissed as mere moralising, since Aunt Frances also writes that "Your older brother and your cousin should be your warning, not your pattern ... their too late repentance could not recover what their youthful extravagancies lost them in shortening their days by their infirmarencies, and making what little time they had miserable by continual languishing sickness while they lived."

Whenever Richard wanted any favours, he wrote to Aunt Frances to intercede on his behalf with her husband. When he wanted a horse, he wrote to her asking for Sir William to send him a horse, "for I am told that to ride abroad in an afternoon would be good for my health." She obviously presented the case well, since Sir William replied that he was in favour of Richard having a horse, but because of the "cheatings at Smithfield", it would be better for Richard to buy one at Oxford, and with his usual careful advice adds, "but at a low cost at first, since you have not yet a man of your own, but must trust him with ostlers", and also "If used for exercise and fresh air towards preservation of your health, but let it not be a means to draw you into riotous and drinking company." Later Richard, now a little older and feeling his status rather below that due to his rank, reminds his uncle of his remarks about not having his horse properly cared for until he has a man of his own, and requests "you would please give me leave to keep a man, and a brace of geldings, as some others of my quality here do." Sir William's reply was that now that Richard was near to the end of his stay at Oxford, it would be better to wait until he had taken control of his own estate, and had to account only to himself for the pending of his money.

What may have inspired Richard to this request for a man of his own, is a series of letters concerning the presentation of a piece of plate to the college, as "others of like rank did", and

for which his uncle was to send the money. The amount settled on was around £10, £8 for the plate and £2 for wine and some "extraordinary's" at the presentation ceremony. Most detailed instructions were sent by Sir William, concerning the coat of arms and inscription for the plate. When Richard's tutor suggests a gift of money towards a new building rather than the usual gift of plate, Sir William is adamant, "The plate will preserve your memory and be much more for your credit in the college," and "If you give money any other way it would not be known you had given any, as any other Gentlemen Commoners."

Towards the end of his stay at Oxford, and prompted by Aunt Frances, Richard was able to please his uncle by sending accounts of the visits of various notables to the University. Aunt Frances asked why he had given no account of the visit of the Prince of Tuscany, who had also been entertained by his aunt and uncle at Charlton. The Prince was the son of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, by whom Sir William had been entertained abroad for three months, and was heir to the Medici "which you have heard your uncle so often mention." Richard replies that he had delayed in forwarding his account until he had obtained a copy of the Orator's speech, which was the sole entertainment that the Prince would accept, although the Vice-Chancellor had offered him the use of the King's Lodging, and as usual to such persons, a banquet. One Bird, a stonecutter, presented him with a piece of marble, stained through, "which for the rarity he accepted and rewarded him with six pieces." Sir William was delighted by the copy of the speech, and a further copy was sent to Sir John Finch, the King's Resident at Florence, who "repaired to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Prince's father. After he had perused it, he sent it to Rome, to the Pope and the Jesuits, of both whom the author had great recommendation. This has done honour to the University and the English nation." Again Richard reported that the Archbishop of Canterbury had resigned his Chancellorship of the University, and he later sent a copy of a letter of thanks from the University to the Archbishop, for his "most magnificent Theatre and Print House, which he has built here at his own charge and endowed with £100 per annum to preserve it in repair and to promote printing." He had intended to forward a copy of the Orator's speech at the dedication, "but some that heard it, making bad constructions of some things that he said, he has resolved not to let anyone see it, lest his meaning should be construed as reflecting upon some persons with whom he intends not to quarrel."

In 1669, Richard has to leave Oxford, to which he has now become very attached. Sir William writes "you have stayed at the University now 3 years, and if you should stay any longer without taking your degree it would be a great disappointment to you."

There is a considerable proportion of the correspondence now concerning the settling of debts, and Richard appears unwilling to confess to their extent. In fact, he tries to persuade his uncle to allow him to stay on for another year. "I have great cause to fear that if I should live in London (where I could not have the opportunity of riding) I should much endanger my health, and that is a precious jewel" and he even tries to convince his uncle that he might get an honorary degree when the new Chancellor arrives at the University. Sir William is not to be fooled by this, for he has never heard of "a degree of grace being given to someone resident at the University", and in any case as Richard is now of age, he wishes to hand over to him "the responsibilities of his estate." Once more Richard appeals to Aunt Frances, to order him a suit of clothes "according to the fashion, so that I appear in a garb fit to be owned by Sir William. Do not tell uncle because of other bills I have to present to him." Aunt Frances agrees to this but advises Richard to make a clean breast of his debts, and to make out accounts to the farthing, and then "you may begin one clear bound as the saying is." When Richard does forward his account it is for £100, and then later he admits to a further £3 owing to his tutor, and £1. 4s. for his horse and stable.

The letters give some idea of life at Oxford and an insight into the problems of communications and the transfer of money from one place to another. A notable omission is that there is no mention of politics, in view of his grandfather's connections with Charles I and his father's and especially his uncle's with Charles II. Perhaps this was due especially to the insecurity of the mail, and the lessons learned during the bitter political struggles during the period of the Commonwealth and the years to the Restoration, in 1660.

References:

1. Family Background notes - Burke's Peerage.
2. Oxford History of England, The Early Stuarts, 1603-1660
Godfrey Davis.

All other references are contained in the letters themselves.

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