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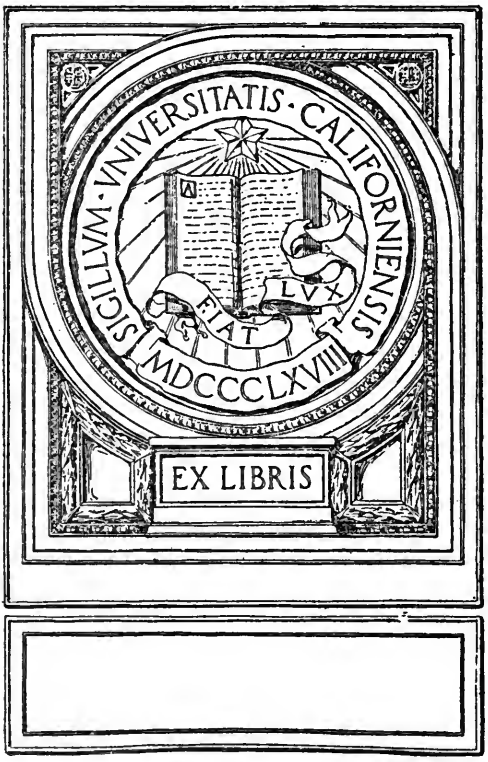
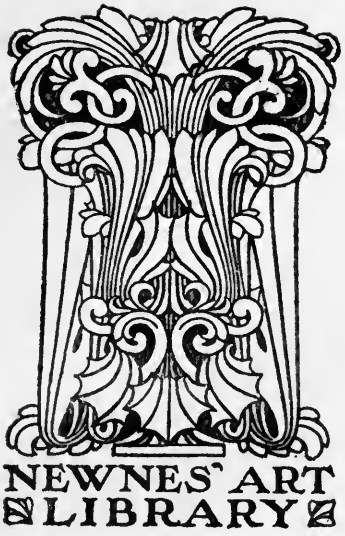
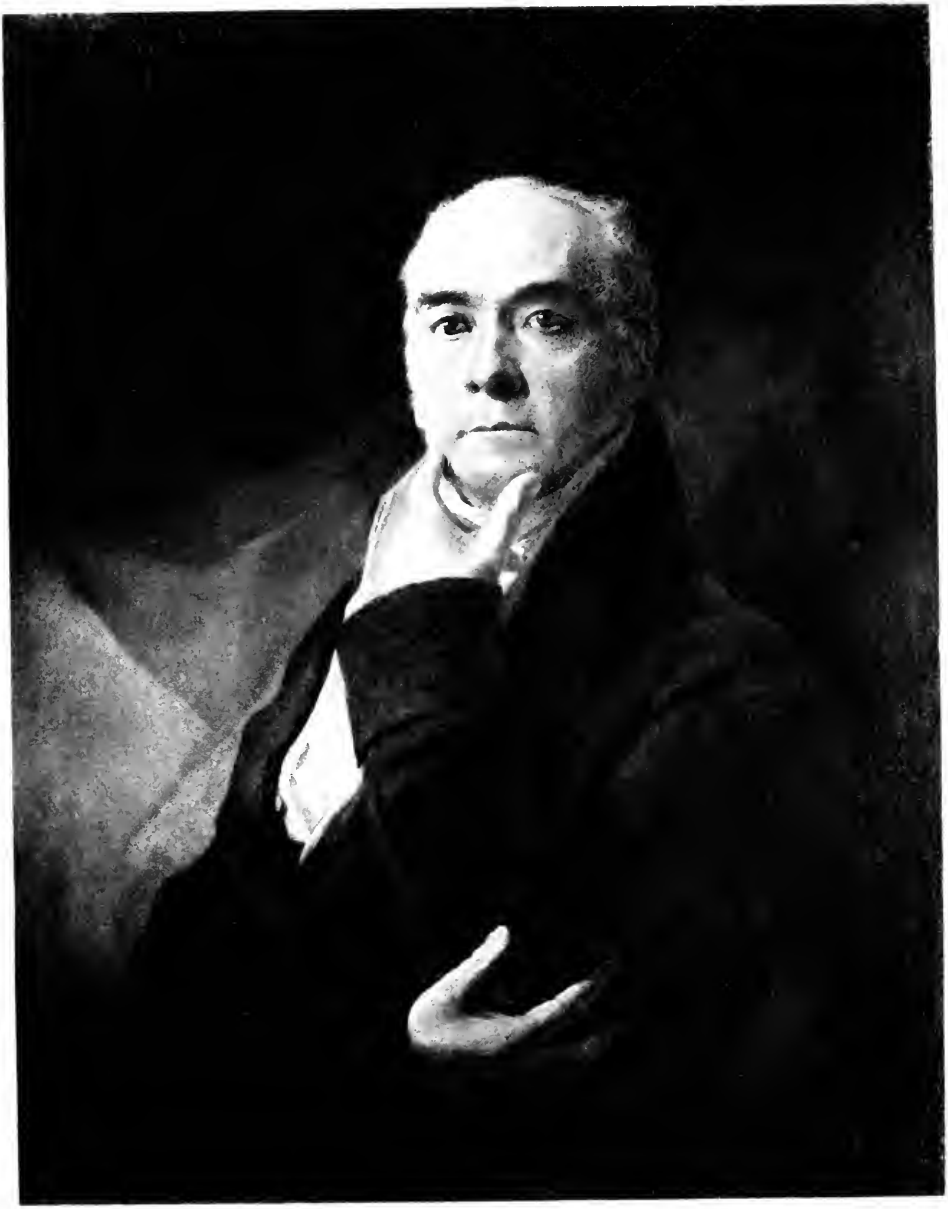




SIR HENRY RAEBURN, R.A.



SIR HENRY RAEBURN

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SIR HENRY RAEBURN, R.A.

By R. S. CLOUSTON

1756–1823

WHENEVER a portrait by Raeburn fetches a higher price than usual in one of our salerooms, someone always writes to the daily papers on "the Raeburn craze," as if it were a new artistic disease of specially virulent type. The great present money value is, of course, a thing almost of yesterday, for which it is easy to account. In the first place, Raeburn painted many more men than women, and male portraits by any British painter are as yet only beginning to be properly appreciated; in the second, his work was practically unknown among the chief buyers of English portraits. In market price probably no British artist's works have varied so much in so short a time; but the place assigned to him in art is unchanged. His new admirers have simply endorsed the opinion of those who have known him all their lives.

I can understand that there might possibly be a third reason. Raeburn is so fresh, so utterly different from everything, either of his time or before it, that it may, for all I can say to the contrary, be necessary to acquire a taste for his pictures. It is certainly essential (as, indeed, it is with the work of most artists) to see a considerable collection of his portraits before forming a final and definite opinion.

We know curiously little of Raeburn's personal history, and most of the scattered facts which help us to see something of the man himself are derived from Cunningham, who has been largely used by all succeeding biographers.

Raeburn's father belonged to a well-to-do Border family, and owned his farm, but some time before Henry's birth he sold it, and started as a manufacturer in Stockbridge, then a suburb of Edinburgh. The elder son, William, was eighteen at the time of his father's death, or old enough at

least to carry on the mills himself. Henry, who was only six, obtained, through the influence of a family friend, a nomination to Heriot's Hospital, where he was educated up to fifteen. Then, having shown, so far as we know, no special aptitude for art, he was apprenticed—Cunningham says by his own wish—to a goldsmith. He had certainly, as was remembered after the event, been able to sketch better than any of his schoolmates, but so have hundreds of other boys with little or no real artistic faculty. In any case, his draughtsmanship was, to begin with, a negligible quantity, and he was employed in precisely the same way as the other apprentices.

It may be permitted, even to an admirer, to doubt whether Raeburn, great artist as he was, would have been specially successful in his chosen trade. The very qualities required for fine metal work are those which his pictures lack. His limitations are much more strongly marked than those of almost any other artist at all approaching him in merit, as from first to last it was the actualities of the human subject which interested him, and he painted no pictures but portraits. He studied many other things, but simply as an adjunct to portraiture. The landscape work, which we know he did, has been lost; but as all was done with the view of using it, in the manner of his day, for backing-up a figure, it probably consisted entirely of hurried notes. It is well to remember, so far as landscape is concerned, that this does not show a lack of versatility (a quality he evinced in many widely different ways), but rather a most unusual strength of purpose; for his landscape backgrounds are almost as deftly treated as his figures. In composition and decorative treatment, on the other hand, he cannot be ranked as the equal of Sir Joshua and Gainsborough. He could put a single figure on canvas in a way that leaves nothing to be desired; but several of his groups are by no means so convincing. It must, I fear, be frankly admitted that in this respect he had neither the learned knowledge of Reynolds, nor the intuitive perception of Gainsborough, and may even be held to have fallen below several portrait painters of the English school who, in every other respect, are on a distinctly lower plane.

It was not, in any case, through success in the by-walk of art he adopted that he first came under the special notice of his employer. He had the faculty of catching likenesses to a degree seldom equalled, and probably never surpassed. With nearly every other portrait painter we hear that his sitters and their friends were often not pleased with the likeness; but in Raeburn's case this never occurred, or, if it did, has not been reported. This is a talent quite apart from art, though of immense, almost immeasurable value, even from an art point of view. It is evident that if the mere likeness required by the ordinary sitter comes without conscious effort on the part of the artist, he has a freer mind to devote to the painter-like qualities which he, primarily, introduces to please himself. Lawrence once required fifty sittings to complete a portrait, and even more are reported as having been occasionally required by quite as capable men. Raeburn was, in fact, a heaven-born portraitist.

It is worthy of remark, as a curious coincidence, that he was educated by

the money left by one goldsmith—the "jingling Geordie" of Scott's "Nigel" —and his special gift discovered by another. Raeburn's master, a Mr. Gilliland, who is described by Cunningham as "a mild and worthy man," saw some of the sketches—"caricatures," if we are to believe Cunningham—which the apprentice made of his fellows, and, most fortunately, was able to see that portraiture was his destined walk in life. At first, being a jeweller and dealing to some extent with small miniatures and other mementoes of the time, he obtained for him some commissions, and was very possibly also competent to advise to some extent on methods.

If it were not a matter of history that Raeburn worked for some years as a miniaturist it would be impossible to arrive at the fact from a study of his later work. Anything more unlike miniature feeling can scarcely be imagined. It served him, however, in lieu of other training. The minute study of form gave him a grip of actual facts which, in his instance, eventually led to the happiest results.

Commissions seemed to have poured in upon the young artist to such an extent that Gilliland, "on the payment of a certain sum," rescinded the articles of apprenticeship; but when this occurred is not stated. The probability, however, is that it was after Raeburn's marriage, which seems to have taken place in 1777 or early in 1788, "when he was in his twenty-second year." Dr. Andrew Duncan had a pupil at the Edinburgh Medical School named Charles Darwin—an uncle of the famous man—who, after showing great ability, died from blood-poisoning caught in the dissecting-room. Duncan was so impressed by his personality that he ordered a memorial ring from Gilliland, who immediately called in one of his apprentices to suggest a design which he afterwards carried out. The apprentice was young Raeburn, and Duncan thereafter preserved the ring "as a memorial of the singular and early merit both of Darwin and Raeburn." Darwin died "about 1778," and the importance of the date, for present purposes, is that it is the last we hear of Raeburn's apprenticeship. We may infer that, his wife being a woman of means, it was his marriage which made both the money payment and the relinquishment of miniature painting possible and expedient.

Gilliland's shop was situated close to Parliament House, the headquarters of the legal profession, and it was probably through their proximity that Raeburn made the acquaintance of the famous "Jock Clerk" (afterwards Lord Eldin), who was then studying law. As Clerk "had some skill of hand in the art of painting," the acquaintance rapidly became a firm friendship which endured through life. The lads were often at each other's rooms, and on one of these occasions Cunningham tells an amusing anecdote. Raeburn, being invited to dine with his friend, arrived, to find the landlady placing two dishes on the table, one containing three herrings and the other three potatoes. "Did I not tell ye, woman," said Clerk, "that a gentleman was to dine with me, and that ye were to get *six* herrings and *six* potatoes?"

Cunningham retails this story to show to what straits these young

aspirants for fame were reduced, the one being compelled to "purchase costly colours and the other expensive books." I think we may spare our pity. Raeburn, at least, was doing very well at the time, executing about two miniatures a week, and water-colours can barely be called "costly." It is a dangerous thing to take most of Clerk's reported sayings too seriously; nor was he the man to allow a good story to fall flat for want of a little setting. It is rather to be feared that Cunningham, though extremely useful as a gatherer of facts, was deficient in humour.

Cunningham's account of the meeting between young Raeburn and his future wife is best given in his own words. "One day a young lady presented herself at his studio, and desired to sit for her portrait. He instantly remembered having seen her in some of his excursions, when, with his sketch-book in hand, he was noting down fine snatches of scenery; and as the appearance of anything living and lovely gives an additional charm to a landscape, the painter, like Gainsborough in similar circumstances, had admitted her readily into his drawing. This circumstance, it is said, had its influence. On further acquaintance he found that besides personal charms she had sensibility and wit. His respect for her did not affect his skill of hand, but rather inspired it, and he succeeded in making a fine portrait. The lady, Ann Edgar, the daughter of Peter Edgar, Esquire, of Bridgelands, was much pleased with the skill, and likewise with the manners of the artist; and within a month or so after the adventure of the studio she gave him her hand in marriage, bestowing at once a most affectionate wife and a handsome fortune."

The lady was not Ann Edgar at this time but the Countess Leslie, and a widow of thirty-four, either with children of her own or step-daughters—for the accounts differ. It was certainly somewhat of an experiment for a lad of twenty-two to marry a widow twelve years older than himself, but despite all rules the marriage was a great success.

It is easy to understand how it was also a real romance. Raeburn was a striking looking and handsome youth, standing a couple of inches over six feet, with a quiet, unassuming manner. She was pretty, *petite* and vivacious; and younger, so far as mind was concerned, than her husband, for even as an elderly lady she could romp with a whole bevy of children. In family there was no great difference, though her social and worldly position was so much better. "Peter Edgar, Esquire" began as factor to the Earl of Selkirk, and acquired Bridgelands by marriage.

The advantages of his marriage to Raeburn, especially at this particular time, were enormous, for it not only gave him money, but established position. The changed aspect of his affairs widened his ambition, and he was no longer content to pot-boil as a cheap miniaturist. Also, as has been already suggested, it probably relieved him from an irksome apprenticeship.

It appears that, even before this time, Gilliland had introduced his promising apprentice to Martin, who was then the best portrait-painter in Edinburgh. Martin was a capable artist, so capable, indeed, that he had been one of Ramsay's hacks when that great artist, spoiled by his London success,

turned his studio into a portrait factory. Martin was of a peculiarly jealous disposition, and though the introduction was made so that Raeburn should acquire some knowledge of technique, that was just what he refused to give.

It is difficult for the modern artist to put himself entirely in the place of these old men. What are now considered mere tricks of the trade, which any promising youngster will be told just as soon as it is good for him to learn, were then carefully guarded secrets. Even the ordinary rules of composition were confided in whispers, under the seal of secrecy; and Martin carried this course of action to an excess which must, even in those days, have been unique. Most probably he saw the genius of the lad, and took the course he did to avoid rivalry.

It is, nevertheless, open to doubt if the art world does not owe him something for not teaching the young artist some of the received "short cuts" of the time. Raeburn had not only artistic perceptions, he had very considerable ingenuity. He must have discovered (or been told) very early that the three primaries are the basis of colour. On this principle almost all his flesh shadows are made. Raeburn's palette is not merely of technical interest; it is important as proving that the formulæ he used to the day of his death were worked out, unaided, as a student, and they were so different from those ordinarily employed as, of themselves, to give a distinctive quality to his work.

For about seven years after his marriage Raeburn continued to work in Edinburgh, but no longer as a miniaturist. He did some fine portraits during this period, but they showed promise more than achievement. This was a fact of which he himself seems to have been thoroughly aware; for, at the age of thirty, he left a flourishing practice as a portrait painter to devote, for the first time in his life, two years to study.

He first went to London, and may have stayed there for some months; but, by the advice of Sir Joshua, went with his wife to Rome. Reynolds must have been greatly struck by his attainments, as he actually offered to find the money for his expenses—a most unexpected instance of generosity.

It would be of the greatest artistic interest if we could only tell how Raeburn employed his time while in Rome; for in the two years of his sojourn there he transformed himself from a decent second-rate artist to a portrait painter, who, so far as England is concerned, was indisputably in the first rank. The only facts given are that he made no copies, and took the advice of his friend Byers, never to paint what was not actually before him.

When, many years afterwards, Wilkie went to Spain, he professed to be struck by the great resemblance between Velasquez and Raeburn. Wilkie, of course, did not mean either style or handling—in these there is no parallel—but that directness and symplicity which characterises both artists. On this remark, however, a theory has been built up that Raeburn formed his style from the single fine Velasquez he saw at Rome. Unless Raeburn was artistically blind he must have seen and studied this portrait. He

may even have been influenced by it; but, in the one thing he can possibly have taken from it, he bettered the instruction. If I could think the truthful characterisation of a mood which we, in the art slang of the day, call "momentariness," the highest quality in a portrait, I should be compelled, out of all the world, to place Raeburn first.

His success in this particular is greatly due to his method of work, which, so far as I am aware, he was the first to adopt. He placed his canvas either beside or just behind his subject. He then retired to a distance, and conversed with the sitter till he saw the exact expression he wished. Having, so to speak, photographed it in his mind, he went to his easel and put it as rapidly as possible on the canvas while the impression was still distinct.

In very few of Raeburn's portraits do we find a "set" expression. Whatever there is is so obviously evanescent—so assuredly a thing of the moment—that we would scarcely be surprised to see it change before our eyes.

One particularly noticeable thing is the treatment of the mouth and lips. The convention of his time was to make the upper lip dark and the lower light. This must be so, to some extent, unless the light comes from below; but he never represented an upper lip as a flat tone with a hard outline. The mobility of the mouth appealed to him quite as much as its mere form, and his portraits either suggest actual movement of the lips, its cessation, or the slight compression common before speaking. When his lips smiled they did not grin; and whatever they did, they were flesh, not cast iron.

When a young artist studies abroad, he usually spends the next few years in forgetting the mannerisms he has picked up. When Raeburn returned to Scotland, it was as a greatly improved but a still more distinctive artistic personality. His reception was immediate, and the only dissentient voice was that of poor jealous Martin, who saw himself ruined. He unconsciously copied Sir Joshua's periphrasis in speaking of Romney, and described Raeburn as "the lad in George Street"; averring, moreover, that "he painted much better before he went to Italy." This is manifestly mere trade malice, if only for the fact that the portrait of Neil Gow, in the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland, was painted almost immediately on his return, and his "Dr. Nathaniel Spens" in 1791.

One of my chief difficulties in writing on Raeburn is to prevent my pen running away with me. I have to remember that he was my first love, and try to discount early associations. But, having seen the latter portrait once more, after having spent many years in widely different environments, I am compelled to say that I consider it the finest full-length male portrait of the British school. There are two more full-lengths by Raeburn which approach it closely, though I would be sorry to make the same remark regarding either. They are the portraits of Sir John Sinclair and Francis, Laird of Macnab. Of the Macnab, Sir Thomas Lawrence said that it was the likest thing to a human being he had ever seen put on canvas; and, after the destructive influences of a century have swept over it, it is impossible

to do other than agree with him. But it is a *tour de force* in realism, and, necessarily, lacks the subtler qualities of art.

In 1810 Raeburn once more visited London, this time with the view of settling there. From this he was dissuaded by Lawrence; but it is unfair to suggest that it was because he feared him as a rival. Lawrence, with his distinguished manner, was perfectly, if not painfully, aware of the necessity for the social side of a portrait painter's life in London, as also of that for flattering his sitters when they came to his studio. Raeburn could hold his own among the wits of the Scotch Bar, and behave like a gentleman in any society; but he would have made a very poor second to Lawrence either in courtly speeches or flattered paint. Raeburn, moreover, had large monetary interests in Edinburgh. He was continually building on the land which came to him through his wife, and his affairs there required his personal supervision. At one time, indeed—so a friend of the writer's was told by Sir William Fettes-Douglas—despite his own large income and his wife's fortune, he was in money difficulties for some years, and, being compelled to clear himself by his brush, his work deteriorated. There was certainly no falling away so early as 1810; but there was shortly afterwards, and, if the trip to London was at the beginning of his troubles, and he stated his whole case to Lawrence, he got sound business advice.

Long before his death Raeburn, like Scott, had worked off his liabilities. His work became nearly, if not quite, as good as ever, as may be seen in his diploma picture—"A Boy and Rabbit." Though he was elected an R.A. in 1815, this picture was only presented in 1821. It is in this one instance that Cunningham allows himself to criticise. "No artist," he says, "seems willing to give one of his best works; they perhaps consider it as a disagreeable tax, which may be paid in inferior coin." To my thinking, Raeburn was one of the few men who gave unstintedly of their best.

When George IV. visited Scotland in 1822 Raeburn received a much-belated knighthood, and in the following May the King appointed him his "limner and painter in Scotland, with all fees, profits, salaries, rights, privileges, and advantages thereto belonging."

"The extent of those rights and privileges," says Cunningham, "and the value of those fees and profits, this eminent painter had never an opportunity of ascertaining; he was seized with a mortal sickness, and had laid down his head to die on the very day that the nomination was announced."

ILLUSTRATIONS.

Photo, Annan

DR. NATHANIEL SPENS

REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE ROYAL COMPANY OF ARCHERS

Photo, Braun, Clément

LORD NEWTON — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Braun, Clément

MRS. HAMILTON — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Braun, Clément

MRS. URQUHART — GLASGOW

Photo, Annan

LADY CARMICHAEL

COLLECTION OF SIR T. D. GIBSON CARMICHAEL, BART.

Photo, Annan

MRS. JAMES CAMPBELL — COLLECTION OF LIONEL MUIRHEAD, ESQ.

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MRS. CAMPBELL OF BALLIMORE — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

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MRS. KENNEDY OF DUNURE — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

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CHARLOTTE MUNRO OF CRAIGLOCKHART

Photo. Annan

PORTRAIT UNKNOWN

Photo, Hanfstaengl

MRS. LAUZUN — NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

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MISS FRASER OF REELIG — COLLECTION OF WILLIAM BEATTIE, ESQ.

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GIRL SKETCHING — COLLECTION OF MRS. GEORGE HOLT

Photo, Hanfstaengl

MRS. SCOTT MONCRIEFF — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

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BOY AND RABBIT — ROYAL ACADEMY (DIPLOMA GALLERY)

Photo, Annan

PORTRAITS OF TWO BOYS — COLLECTION OF G. H. MUNRO HOME

Photo, Mansell

WILLIAM FERGUSON OF KILRIE

COLLECTION OF R. C.
MUNRO FERGUSON, ESQ., M.P.

Photo, Mansell

SIR JOHN SINCLAIR OF ULBSTER

COLLECTION OF SIR J. TOLLEMACHE SINCLAIR

Photo, Braun, Clément

COLONEL ALASTAIR MACDONELL
OF GLENGARRY

SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Mansell

THE MACNAB — COLLECTION OF MRS. BAILLIE HAMILTON

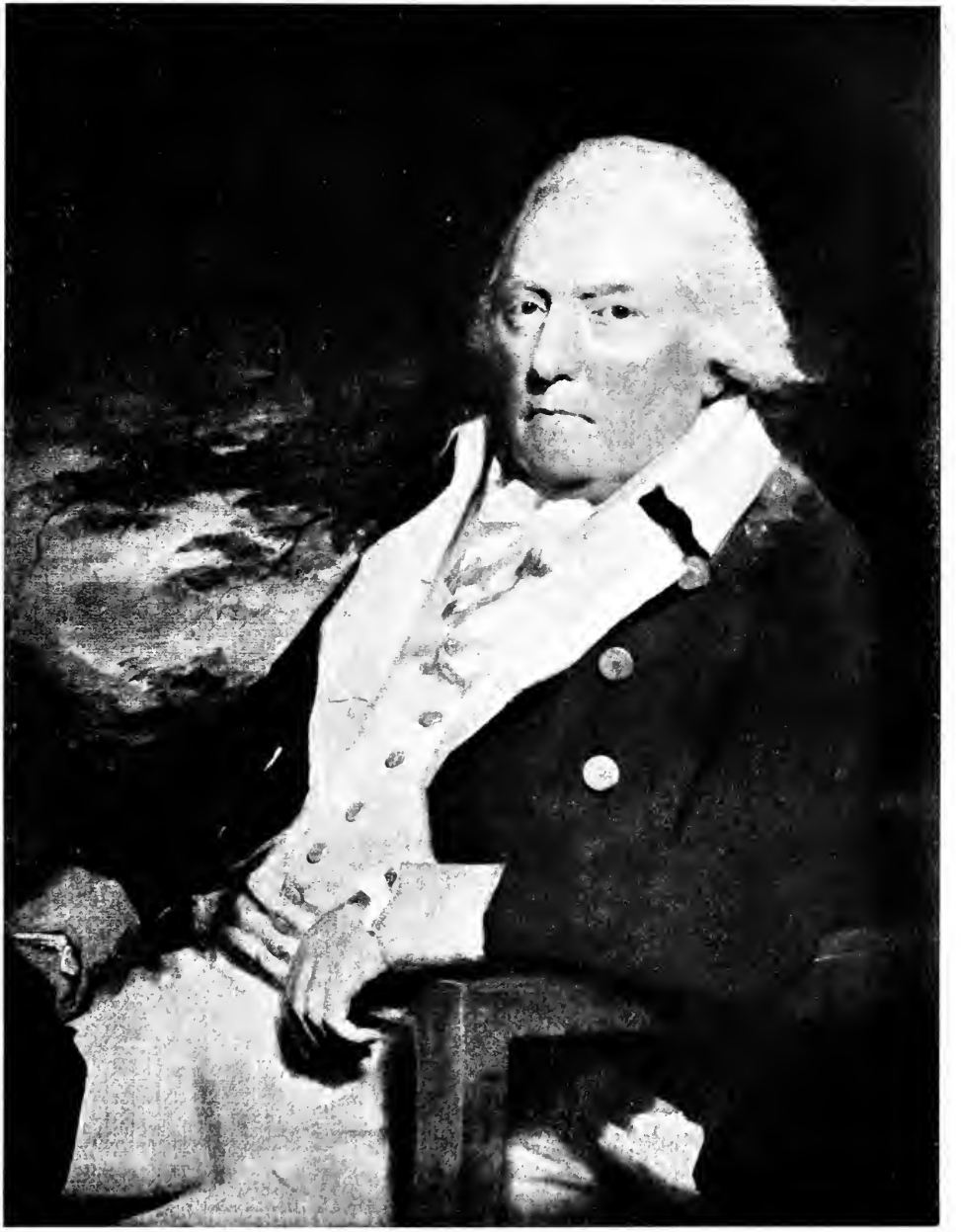
Photo, Mansell

GENERAL RONALD FERGUSON

COLLECTION OF R. C. MUNRO FERGUSON, ESQ., M.P.

Photo, Annan

PORTRAIT OF NEIL GOW — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY



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PORTRAIT UNKNOWN

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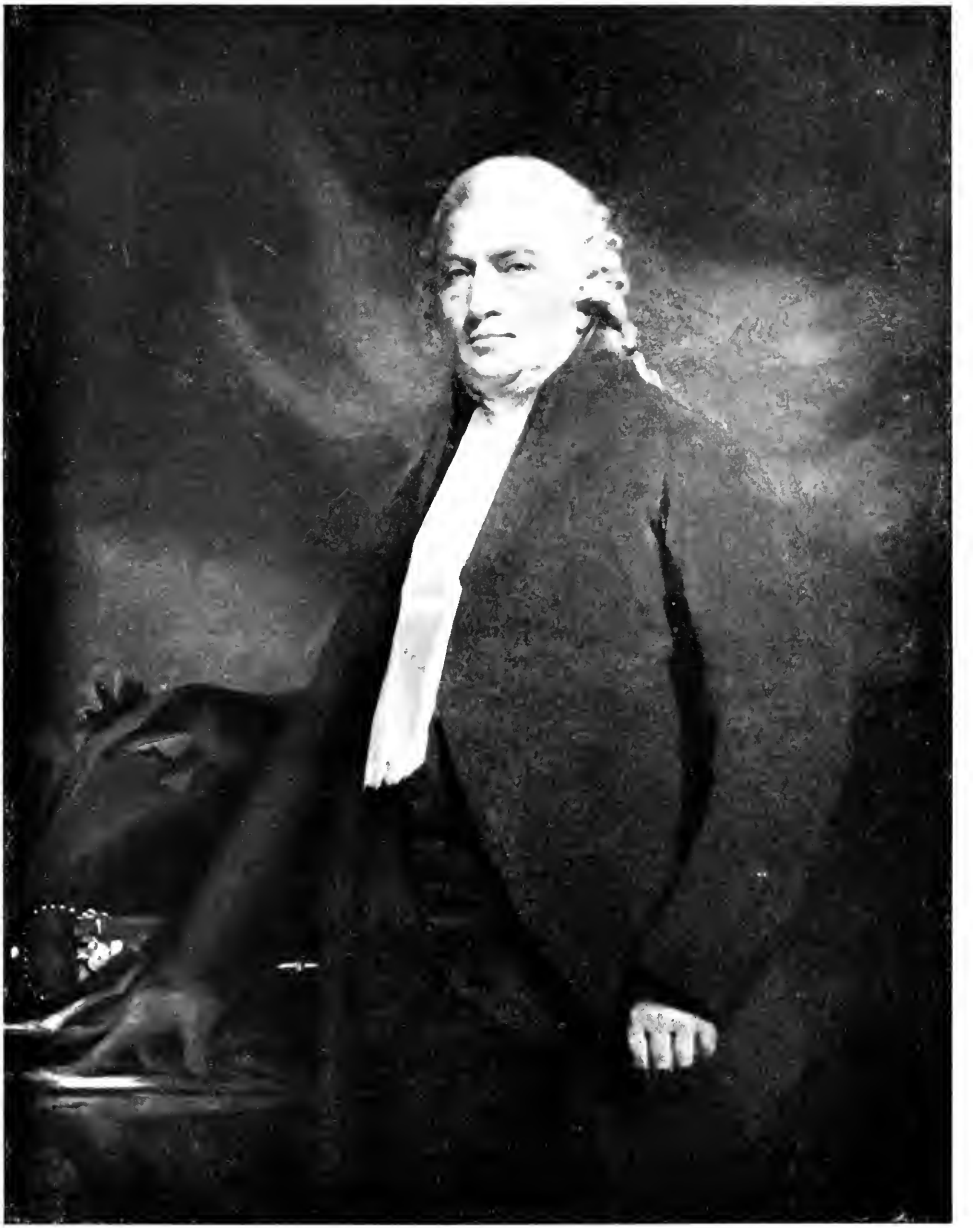
PORTRAIT OF MR. ADAM, ARCHITECT — COLLECTION OF W. A. COATS, ESQ.



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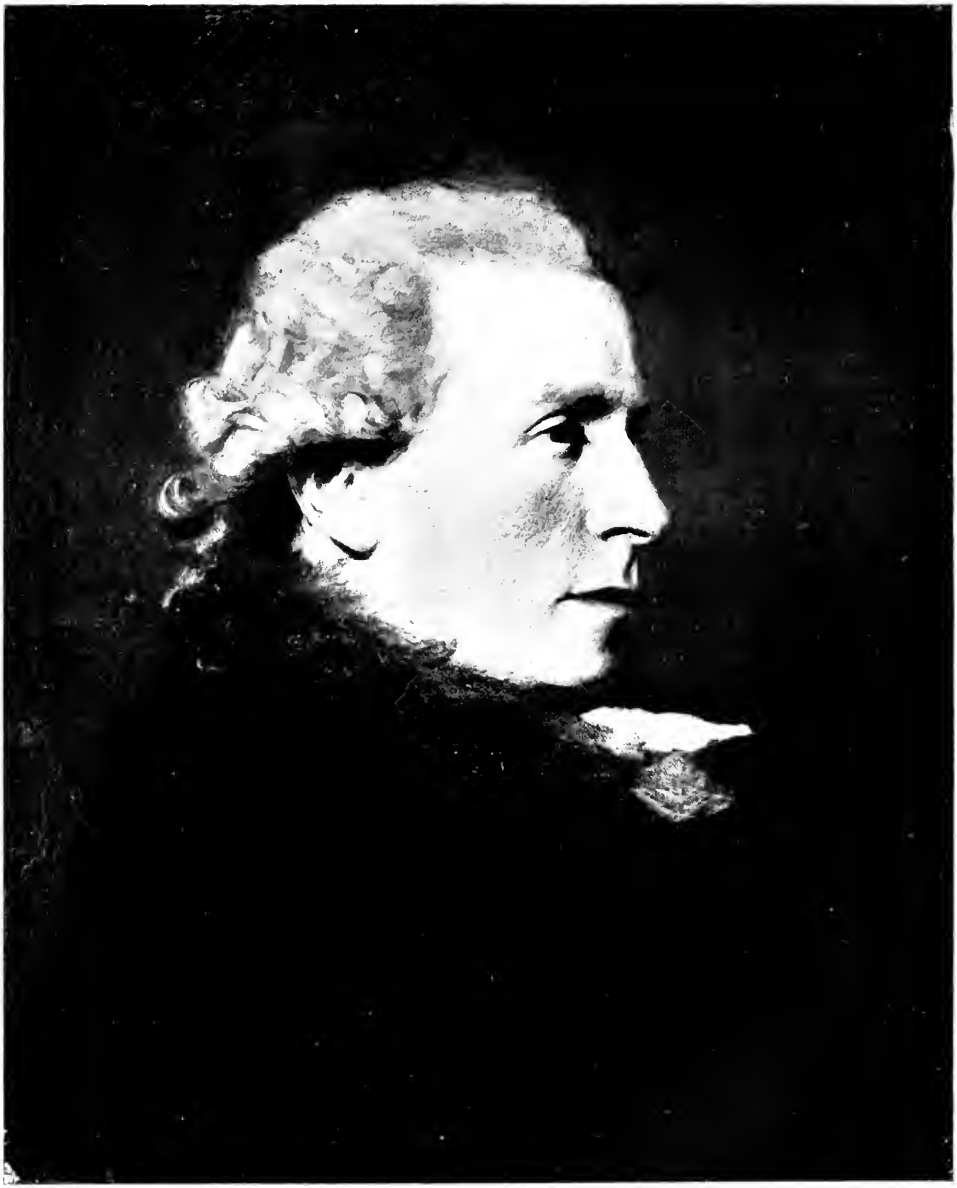
LORD PRESIDENT BLAIR — PROPERTY OF WRITERS TO THE SIGNET



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PORTRAIT UNKNOWN — COLLECTION OF W. A. COATS, ESQ.

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LORD BRAXFIELD — PROPERTY OF FACULTY OF ADVOCATES

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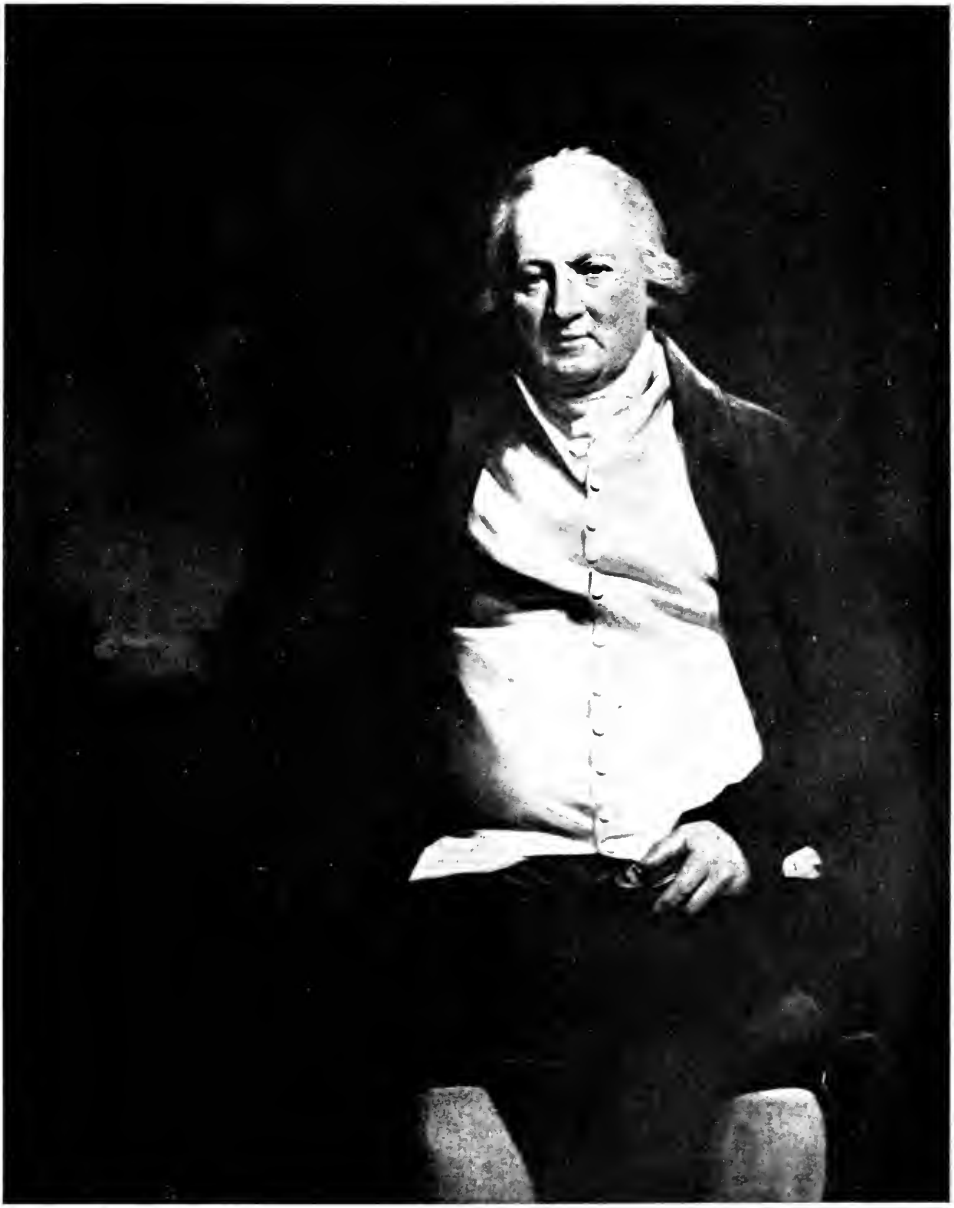
JOHN TAIT OF HARVIESTON
AND HIS GRANDSON

COLLECTION OF MRS. PITMAN



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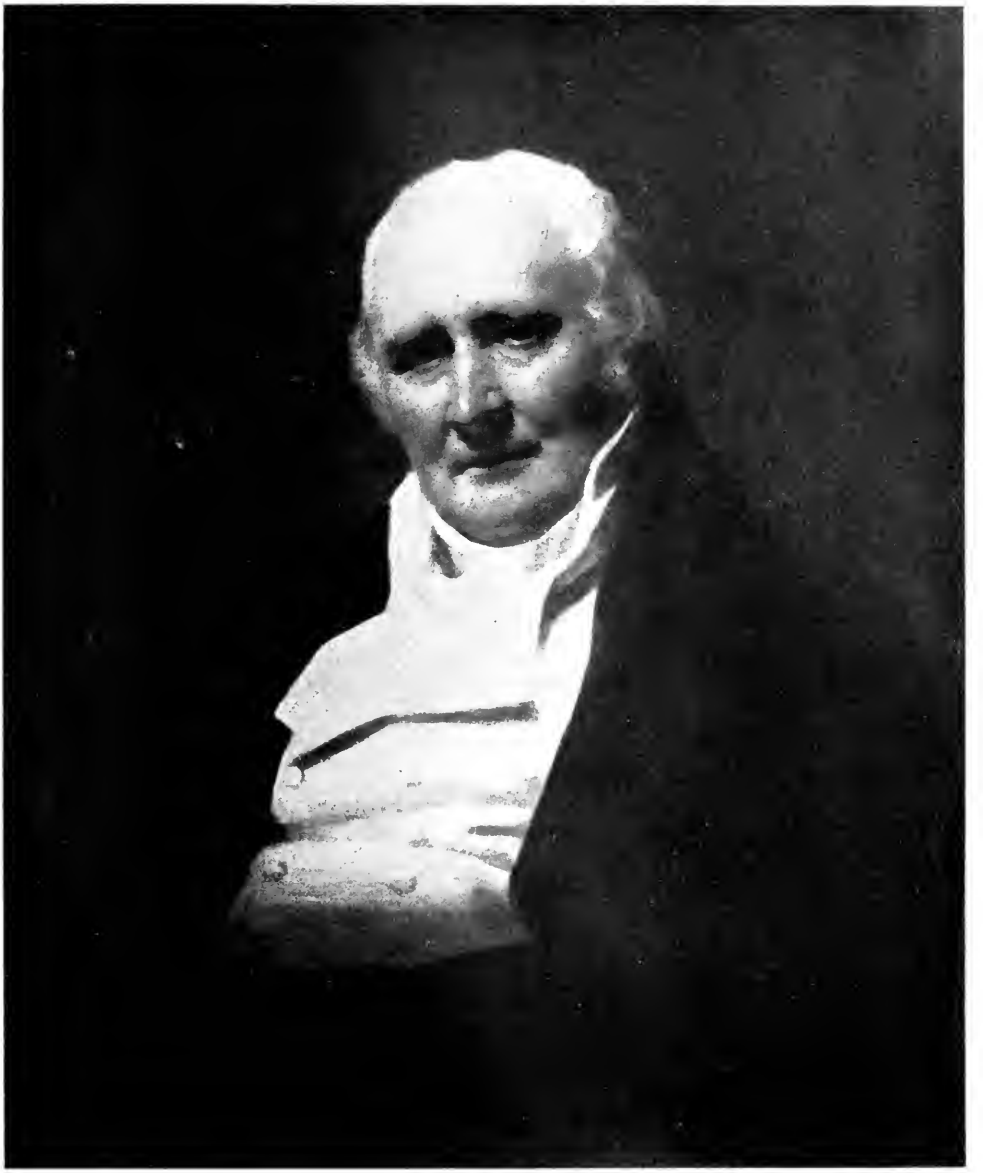
JOHN GRAY OF NEWHOLM — SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY



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JOHN WAUCHOPE, WS. SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

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HENRY MACKENZIE — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

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ROBERT FERGUSON OF RAITH

COLLECTION OF R. C.
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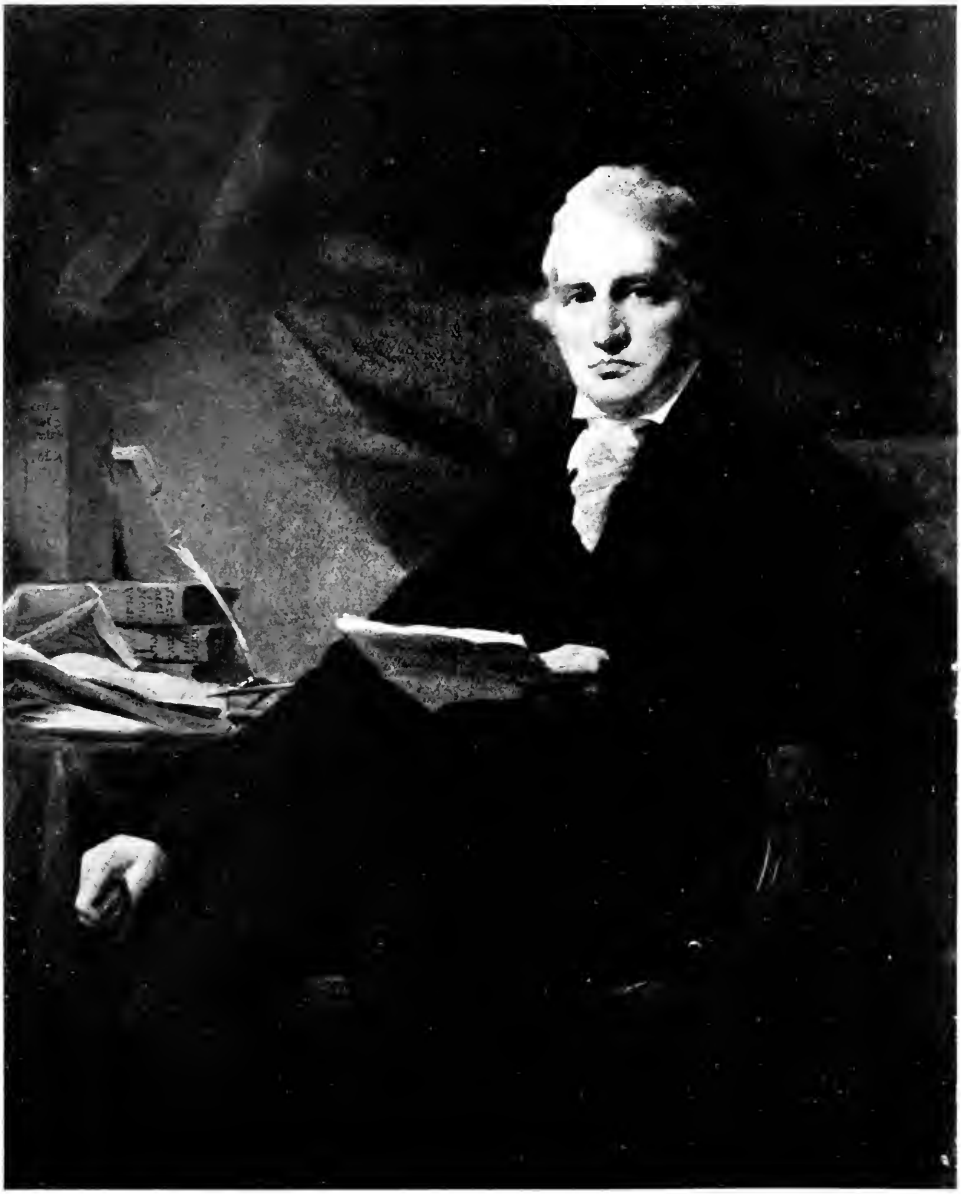
J. GIBSON LOCKHART — COLLECTION OF W. A. COATS, ESQ.



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SIR JOHN SINCLAIR — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

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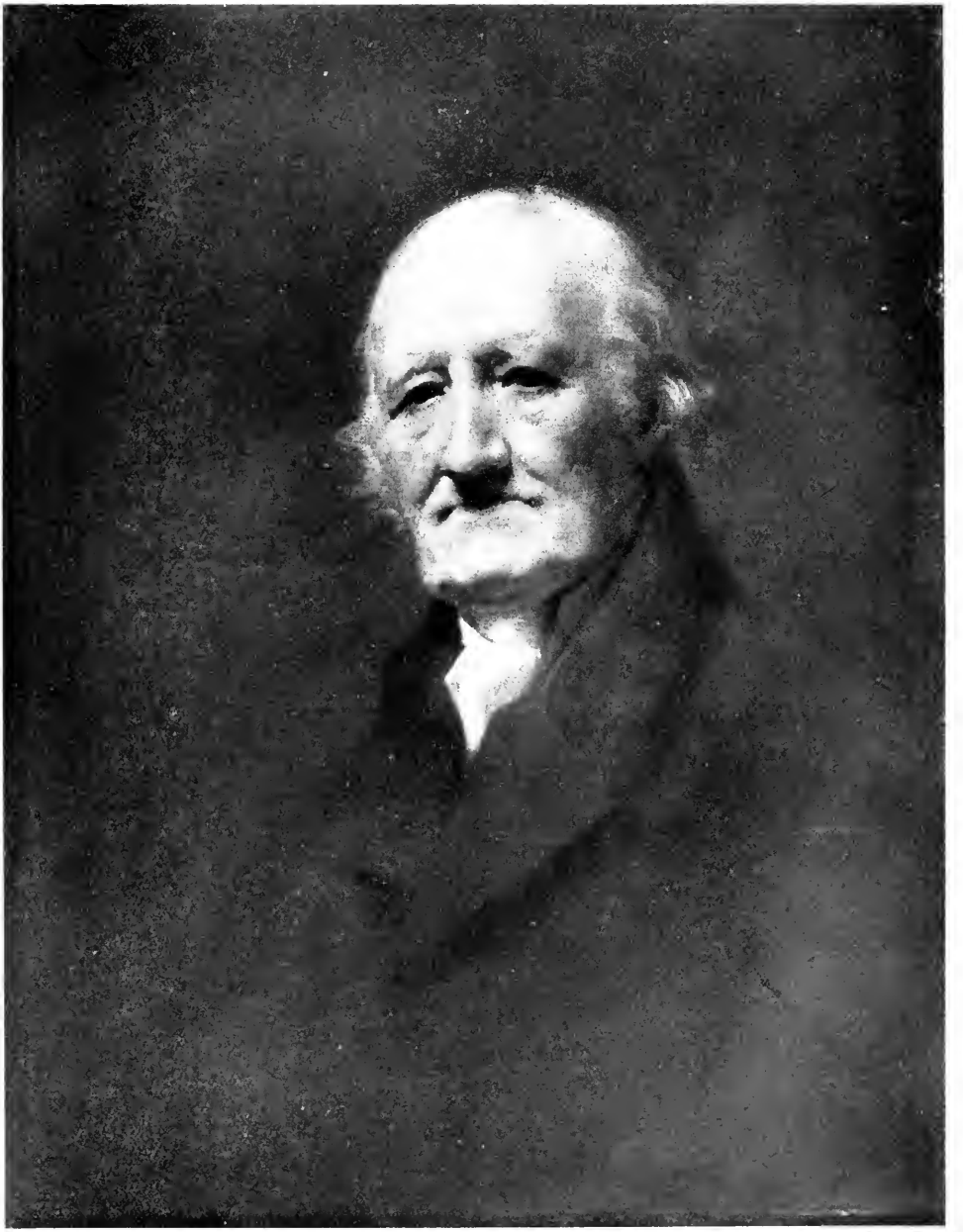
FRANCIS HORNER — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON



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JAMES WARDROP OF TORBANEHILL — COLLECTION OF MRS. SHERLEY

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PORTRAIT OF A DIVINE — COLLECTION OF W. A. COATS, ESQ.

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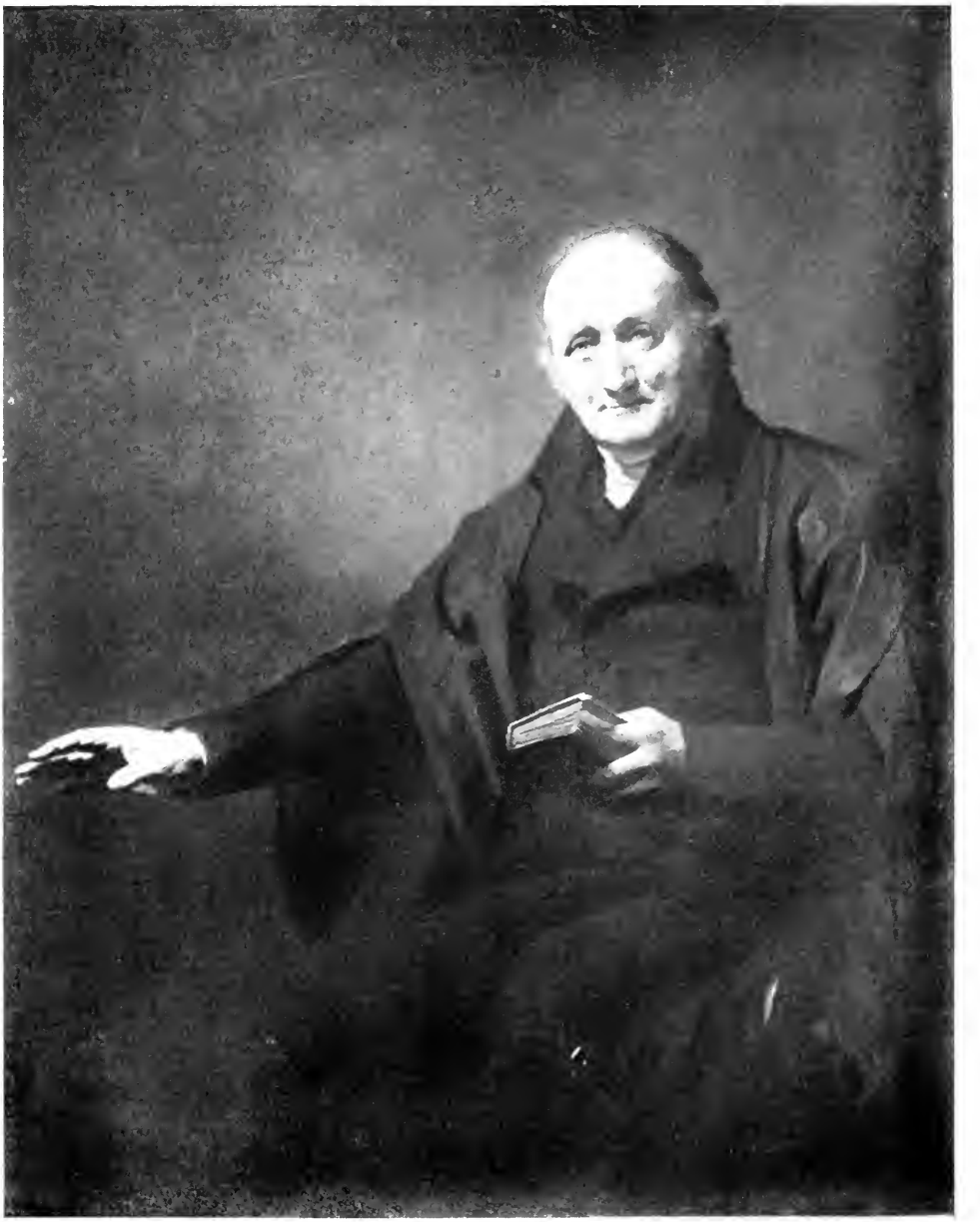
PROFESSOR JOHN PLAYFAIR — NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON



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ALEXANDER ADAM, LL.D. SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

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SIR WALTER SCOTT — COLLECTION OF W. BUCHANAN, ESQ.

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SIR DAVID BAIRD — COLLECTION OF LORD ABERCROMBY

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GENERAL SIR W. MAXWELL OF CALDERWOOD, BART.

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PROFESSOR JOHN WILSON — ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY

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THE FERGUSON BROTHERS — COLLECTION OF R. C. MUNRO FERGUSON, ESQ., M.P.

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MRS. FERGUSON OF RAITH AND CHILDREN

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LADY HUME CAMPBELL OF MARCHMONT AND CHILD

SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY

Photo, Hanfstaengl

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL
BRYCE McMURDO

NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON