

## THE ETCHINGS OF JOHN CLERK OF ELDIN

LECTURE FOR THE OLD EDINBURGH CLUB PRESENTED BY GEOFFREY BERTRAM  
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Archibald Skirving  
*John Clerk of Eldin*  
Pastel  
private collection

Thank you for coming to hear about John Clerk of Eldin and his etchings. In the following slide show all the images are by John Clerk of Eldin unless indicated otherwise.

My first encounter with John Clerk of Eldin was in 1976 when I was working at the Edinburgh art shop and gallery Aitken Dott & Son. Aitken Dott had an antiquarian print department that included a small number of Clerk of Eldin prints. As I was deliberating on possible progressing to do a postgraduate course, the director of the business suggested that Clerk of Eldin would be a worthy subject for a research degree. Professor Duncan Macmillan of Edinburgh University's Department of Art History agreed, and so I spent the next five years preparing the thesis. I took the opportunity in 1978 to organise an exhibition of Clerk of Eldin's etchings that took place during the Edinburgh Festival - this celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Clerk of Eldin's birth, the accompanying catalogue leading me back to Clerk of Eldin and his etchings via an email enquiry after a twenty five year absence.

This evening I am going to take you back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. 2012 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of John Clerk of Eldin who died on the 10<sup>th</sup> May 1812, a remarkable individual whose achievements span Arts and Sciences in equal measure. For me, Clerk of Eldin is one of the more fascinating characters of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Edinburgh, a man whose friends and acquaintances included many of the leading thinkers of the day – Adam Smith, David Hume, Joseph Black, James Hutton, Adam Ferguson, to name but a few. Lord Cockburn in his *Memoirs* published in 1856 states that Clerk was “*looked up to by all the philosophers of his day, who received hints and views from him which they deemed of great value.*”

*In December this year it pleased God to give my family another increase by the birth of a son, who was christened John after my deceased son.* So Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Baronet and Baron of the Exchequer announced the birth of his son in his memoirs. The young John Clerk was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1728, the seventh son, into one of the most distinguished families in the Edinburgh and Lothians region. He inherited much of his father's thirst for knowledge, being an industrious student at Dalkeith Grammar School. Unlike his father he

did not go abroad to complete his education – Sir John had studied law at Leyden - but enrolled at Edinburgh University where he is found on the class lists of Alexander Munro primus, professor of anatomy. Sir John had his son marked for the medical profession, stating that he would “prove a top chyrurgeon as his Masters Drummond and Campbell think.” As Iain Gordon Brown has noted in his research on the family, there were several doctors in preceding generations of Clerks and this was a line young John was perhaps expected to follow – his father considered himself ‘a piece of a doctor’ and amateur diagnosis was a passion - the library at Penicuik containing nearly 400 medical books.

Young John certainly had an interest in other sciences as well. A letter from the Factor of Penicuik to Sir John states that *John is the chief operator here (Penicuik House) in Electrical Experiments. He has turned an old worset wheel to an engine and has got a large globe from some of the chymists; but tho his machine be clumsy, yet he performs all the experiments on it, and his mother and systers are to be electrified one of these days by a solemn invitation.*

Though sciences were not to be young Clerk’s main career path I cite Clerk’s enthusiasm for them as they remained a fascination for him throughout his life. Instead Clerk became a merchant, in the footsteps of his great grandfather, entering into a business partnership with one Alexander Scott in the Luckenbooths. He is recorded in the lists of the Company of Merchants who described themselves as being sellers ‘of cloths, stuffs or other merchandise for the apparel and wear of men and women..’ He remained a merchant until 1762 when he took a half share in the Pendreich Coalfields near Lasswade.

While working as a merchant Young Clerk came to be closely associated with Edinburgh’s social circles, an important meeting place being the home of the Adam family in the



View of Edinburgh from the King's Park, with the Cowgate

Cowgate where Clerk was a constant visitor. The Adams and the Clerks were well known to each other. William Adam was a successful builder, architect and supplier of building materials, who in 1730 had become the principal mason to the Board of Ordnance of North Britain. Adam had worked for Sir John Clerk, not least of which was the construction of the beautiful, classical house of Mavisbank in 1723. Indeed William Adam became a close friend of Sir John and accompanied him on a trip around England in 1727, visiting country seats including Clivedon, Wilton and Wanstead Park. So it would have been of no surprise to anyone for young John to be spending time at the Adam house. William’s son Robert was the same age as Clerk, the two men becoming life long friends, Robert still to become the pre-eminent architect of his time. Indeed Clerk brought the families closer together by marrying Robert’s younger sister Susanna in 1753. John Clerk and Robert Adam would often

go out drawing together, Clerk remarking that his friend's early ambition was to be a painter as he 'very sedulously occupied his leisure hours at university in sketching landscapes'. Their shared interest in old Scottish buildings would underlie Adam's future Castle style and be the focus of his fantasy watercolour landscapes. For Clerk, it was the subject for his drawings and etchings.

It was through the Adam family that Clerk met the English artist Paul Sandby. Sandby was of similar age to John and Robert, arriving in Scotland in 1747 to work for the Board of Ordnance Survey at Fort George, the Highlands military base which was being expanded by William Adam. Both men learned much from Sandby's painting techniques, the three men making drawing trips around the region. Clerk and Sandby became firm friends that lasted well after Sandby left Scotland in 1751. A significant point about Sandby's stay is that it is thought that he learned the art of etching while in Edinburgh, significant not only because Sandby went on to become the most productive English printmaker of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but also for the encouragement he gave to Clerk when Clerk took up etching.

In the year following Clerk's purchase of the Pendreich Coalfields, he built himself a little mansion on an adjacent plot to the coal mine which he called Eldin, the name being based



on an old Scots word elding or eilding meaning fuel, in accord with his involvement with coal. Mining coal was an important part of the Clerk family business portfolio, the veins along the Esk Valley providing good income for the Estate. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik was a highly respected coal operator, becoming a specialist and innovator in developing new mining techniques and in mine safety. Clerk of Eldin was to be no different, and he himself was to be consulted as an expert by coal operators and mine owners. However not everything always went smoothly for Clerk in his own mines, his income revenues diminished during the 1770s due to the dubious activities of his coal grieve.

During the 1760s Clerk of Eldin found time to travel. Although roads were improving this was still not an easy thing to do, many not being more than tracks, nor was it commonly undertaken except by the aristocracy, some gentry and tradesmen. This was at the very start of a new interest in, and appreciation of, the nation's landscape, that was to lead to the huge rise in travel books, prints and paintings produced in the ensuing decades. In this regard Clerk is an early trendsetter!

Clerk always took with him sketch books and pencils. It is known that he went to the South



Elan Stalker Castle

West of Scotland, including Arran and Bute, in 1763 and 1768;



View of Salisbury from Wilton Park

to Wales in 1766; the Highlands and North of Scotland in 1769 .These travels continued throughout the 1770s – to London in 1771 and 1778; Carlisle and the South of England in 1772 ; the Highlands again in 1776 and 1779. William Adam, his nephew was to write *He excelled in landscape drawing, representing always with accuracy the views of country or of building which were the object of his art; the number of these views is immense.*

It was Clerk’s father who insisted that *all the young lads of this family to learn to draw or design as the best means of advancing their fortunes, for they can neither be good sojars not first seamen if they know not how to design a Country, a Town, and especially a fortified Town or Castle – They will find this the only true way of rising in the world provided they joyn with a competent knowledge of all parts of the mathematicks particularly Geometry of Fortification.* Clerk of Eldin had a natural disposition to drawing which came to be widely recognised.

In a letter of 1779 to the antiquarian Richard Gough Clerk of Eldin wrote *.....having for a long time been in the practice of making sketches and views of nature where ever I went, I had collected a great many drawings, particularly such as taken in a great extent of country. I was at last tempted after long and frequent importunities of virtuosi friends to attempt the same manner in Etching which I had followed in drawing.*

It is not known precisely who these virtuosi friends to whom Clerk refers are, but I venture that it is safe to say that they included Robert Adam and Paul Sandby. Remarkably there is no evidence to link Clerk with any workshop or teacher from whom he could have learned the rudimentary skills of etching. One must therefore consider him as self taught.



For those of you unfamiliar with the art of etching, let me just briefly explain the basis of the process in order that you get some inkling as to what challenges Clerk set himself. Etching is a printmaking technique where, unlike an engraving in which the drawing is carved into a steel plate, the image is etched into a copper plate using acid, often referred to in the past as Aqua Fortis, this usually being either nitric or hydrochloric acid. On taking up the copper plate one covers it all over (front, back and sides) with a varnish or wax that is impervious to the acid. We know that Clerk then smoked his plates by passing it over the tip of a candle thus leaving a sticky black residue on the surface. In transferring the drawn design from paper, rub chalk on the back of the paper before laying the sheet chalk face down on the plate. The chalk will adhere to the sticky residue when the artist traces over the design. As you can see here, Clerk used red chalk. (This is one of three surviving working drawings used in the making of his etchings.)



Newark Castle

The artist then takes a steel point and draws through the varnish to expose the copper beneath before placing the plate in a bath of acid in which the acid eats through the metal. Indeed the term Etching comes from the Dutch word Eschen meaning to eat or bite. The amount of time the plate is left in the bath will determine the depth of the line which in turn will hold more or less ink resulting in darker or lighter line respectively when printed. The plate is then re-varnished, and fresh drawing made through the surface before the plate is returned to the acid bath, this process repeated until the image has been completed. It's tricky work but one which was preferred by artists for not only being quicker to do than engraving, but etching allowed greater expression of line. But it's not for the faint hearted. Acid burns would not have been uncommon from careless splashes.

So what was the attraction for Clerk? From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, creating art was considered a gentlemanly virtue. Not content to be merely patrons, the nobility and gentry desired to be artistic themselves. Several became amateur landscape etchers. The volumes in the British Museum titled *Etchings and engravings by the nobility and gentry of England; or by persons not exercising the art as a trade* reveal copies of works by other artists, and landscapes



George Simon A view of the ruins of the kitchen and part of the offices at Stanton Harcourt

figure quite prominently. Several predate Clerk's efforts. George Simon, for example, Viscount Nuneham and Earl of Harcourt, a one time pupil of Paul Sandby etched *A view of the ruins of the kitchen and part of the offices at Stanton Harcourt in the county of Oxford with distant view of the Chappel and the parish church* in 1763 from a drawing of 1760.

Or was it that Clerk took it as a challenge? He described all of his etching experiences in a dedicated notebook in which he recorded *...the process used, and the precise time that the different parts of most of his plates were subjected to the action of the aquafortis*, this description provided by David Laing of the Bannatyne Club which reissued Clerk's etchings in book form in 1825 and 1855. Unfortunately this vital document, owned then by the secretary of the club James T Gibson Craig, disappeared with the sale of Craig's library following his death in 1886. I have tried without success to track it down but I remain hopeful that it will turn up one day. The register states that there were 104 etchings but apparently omitted a number of early plates which Clerk did not deem worthy of recording. What is fascinating is the thought that Clerk recorded the making of each plate so meticulously. It occurs to me that Clerk is as interested in the process of etching, from a scientific perspective, as he is in the act of replicating his drawings in print.

Before looking at Clerk's etchings I'd like to make some general points.

- Clerk is unlikely to have had a formal studio, as we would consider an artist to have today
- he was restricted to strength of daylight or candle light in which to work – no electric lights back then!
- he complained about having to wear spectacles which 'have brought me to a confined manner of etching very unlike ye drawings which are all large'.
- as you will see, many of Clerk's etchings are diminutive, some as small as stamps, others not much larger than the size of a business card. One imagines him hunched over, squinting with difficulty at the faint lines on the plate.
- Clerk's subject matter is predominantly townscapes or buildings. One might view him as a topographic artist but this would discount the expressive and painterly qualities that he brought to his etchings. Topography was, and still is, considered as a precise and recognisable record of places. Landscape art is the imaginative manipulation of natural features into a composition that is aesthetically pleasing. The distinction is one of aim and in theory it is sharply defined. In practice, however,

it is not always so easy to make this distinction as both elements may exist in the same artist. It is also worth noting that topographers tended to prefer engraving rather than etching as they could achieve sharper, clearer lines. Engravings, being made using steel plates, were also better wearing and allowed larger numbers of prints to be made, whereas the softness of copper means it wears down quickly, resulting in far fewer perfect impressions.

From his early days Clerk had been drawing views of castles, houses and churches. Like his father, Clerk is a keen antiquarian, and his interest in buildings parallels that of the Society of Antiquaries, of which Clerk was a member from its very first days in 1780, where one of the Society's objectives was to record 'the ancient castles, houses and mote-hills of the nobility, greater and lesser... churches, monuments....remains of its (Scotland's) antient magnificences'. Clerk expressed his opinions on architecture in an incomplete manuscript *A short Retrospective View of the state of architecture in Great Britain previous to the Adam's time, together with an account of the style by him introduced*. Written shortly after Robert Adam's death in 1792 and intended as a kind of biography, the ideas written here are ones which Clerk must have held for the greater part of his life. In it he described castles as being 'sublimely picturesque and beautiful, the stupendous productions of a warlike age'. In presenting many as overgrown with crumbling masonry he enhanced the romantic nature of these places which would have played a significant part in the appreciation of the etchings by those who saw them.

It is generally considered that Clerk started etching around 1770. On a print of *Clackmannan*



Clackmannan Tower

*Tower* in the collection of the National Galleries of Scotland are the words '1<sup>st</sup> plate that I etched' written in ink in Clerks' hand. This image, as in most early plates, is sketchy and experimental. Clerk's progress is one of trial and error, the plates often suffering from surface scratches and poor control of the acid, as one expects from a beginner.

In this early period, Clerk looked to other artist's etchings for technical assistance. Making a convincing image in print requires much more than providing the outline drawing which he was used to making. The compositions have to be well laid out, the image making full use of the entire picture plain to make a complete scene.

Perhaps surprisingly one finds that Paul Sandby does not have much of an influence on Clerk.



Paul Sandby  
*Untitled Landscape*



Paul Sandby  
*View of Leith*

Sandby's very early effort shown here on the left may be unsophisticated but he clearly has an instant grasp of the medium. His development is rapid and by 1751, just after he returned London, one can see the high technical standard that he achieved in a short time in the etching on the right. But by the time Clerk starts to make his prints, nearly twenty years later, Sandby has moved on from this type of etching, as I will show shortly, and not working in a way that Clerk could hope to emulate.

On the other hand, etchings and engravings by European master printmakers were readily available in 18<sup>th</sup> century Edinburgh – an important dealer was the print and book seller Thomas Philipe who was located at *his shop, second door of the Bull turnpike opposite the Tron Church*. A 1770 catalogue includes a comprehensive list of Italian, French and Dutch prints from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries including works by Durer, Callot, Rubens, Rembrandt, Hollar, Waterloo, van Dyck, and many others. Although there is no list to tell us what Clerk owned we know from his account books that he did buy prints. Furthermore, his son Lord Eldin's collection when it was sold contained a large print collection, part of which one presumes he would have inherited. This list includes Rembrandt, Claude Lorrain, Callot, Ostade, Waterloo, Swanevelt, Potter, Hollar and Dujardin. I think that it is safe to say that Clerk of Eldin, coming from a family of art collectors, while also buying art himself, was aware of etchings by these European printmakers.

Indeed, Clerk bases eight of his etchings on the works of others. Two prints derive from Claude Lorrain's *La danse au bord de l'eau* (left);



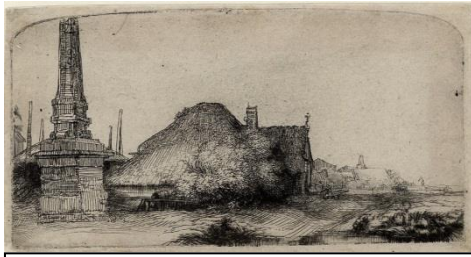
Claude Lorrain  
*Danse au bord de l'eau*



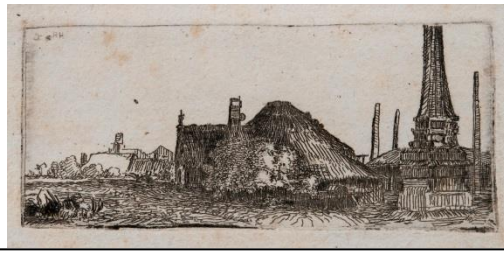
*After Claude Lorrain's Danse au bord de l'eau*

And there is a faithful copy of Rembrandt's *Landscape with an Obelisk* (left):





Rembrandt  
*Landscape with an Obelisk*



*After Rembrandt's Landscape  
with an obelisk*

and five scenes based on prints by the 18<sup>th</sup> century less well known Austrian artist Franz Edmund Weirrotter. This is the first....



Franz Edmund Weirrotter  
*Landscape with a woman and two children*



*After Weirrotter's  
Landscape with a woman and two children*

Through these studies, Clerk was able to introduce new elements into his own work. From Claude it is primarily compositional structure and lighting – in this regard Claude had a significant influence on generations of British artists. His use of framing elements, usually trees, in the foregrounds of his landscapes behind which light was directed, was popular, and compositions constructed in this manner were described as being in the Italian style.

Rembrandt's prints are very different in style; these display a greater naturalism, and show an even, overall lighting. Their aerial perspective is central to providing a sense of distance.

From Weirrotter, to whom he refers throughout his etching career, Clerk gains a better technique for describing masonry and even a further manner of lighting the principal subject.

In addition, Clerk took parts of prints and dropped them into his own images – for example, Weirrotter-like cottages turn up in Clerk's print *Dairsie II*, while Claude's cows and goat from *La Danse* are brought to *Melville Castle*. I have seen this described recently as the 18<sup>th</sup> century form of Clip Art!



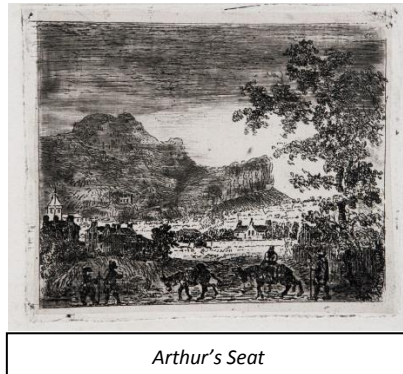
*Dairsie II*



*Melville Castle*

Clerk got over many of the initial technical difficulties reasonably quickly, though some of the drawing is not entirely convincing. He clearly needs to improve the manner in which he describes foliage and masonry, as well as find a less stylised drawing for the ground. Throughout the following years these are his biggest challenges and on which he most focuses his efforts.

He is clearly ambitious even at this early stage as he experiments with tonal shading by applying acid directly onto the plate with a brush (*Arthurs Seat*) though this is not



something he attempted again for another three years.



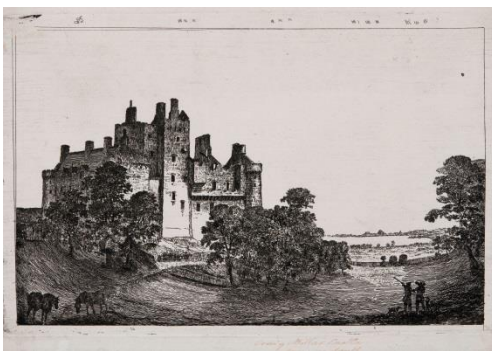
Some early designs are imaginary – *Landscape with 2 men conversing*; *Castle on a Hill with Distant Town I and II*; *Trees with Distant Church*. Alongside those prints based on other artist's designs, one can consider these as practice plates. *The Trees with Distant Church* is quite untypical in composition, and the figures better drawn than most. I sometimes wonder whether or not this is based on someone else's etching but have been unable to identify who or what. In appearance it makes me think of a Dutch landscape. Nonetheless it is worth noting that all his subsequent etchings, without exception, are of specific, known places, and not made up. Having said that, most foreground features are likely to have been invented in refining the composition.

*Rossvyth Castle* is the first etching with a year included in the plate. This is the starting point from which a time line for his development can be created.



*Rossvyth Castle*

The first good sized prints are *Craigmillar Castle from the South West* and *Dumbarton Castle from the West* of 1772 and *Elan Stalker* of 1773. The scale of the etchings provides wider scope for adding more detail and one would think that he could see what he was doing a



*Craigmillar Castle from the South West*



*Dumbarton Castle from the West*

little better. The walls of Craigmillar Castle show greater architectural detail; for example, the corbels beneath the ramparts and window features are more clearly visible, the clumps of trees suggesting more depth through their branches. However, within this first three years of etching, where there are these three good sized prints there are forty or more small ones.

By 1773 one starts to see better detail in Clerk's foliage. The drawing of *Crichton Castle from the North East* is much more refined, the detail on the foreground tree on the left and



*Crichton Castle from the North East*

across the foreground a significant step forward in the development of his etching. Such foreground 'realism' was not uncommon in European prints. The castle itself is still a little



thin, lacking a real feeling for mass and weight, which is where we see the next improvement.

In copying Franz Edmund Weirotter's *Landscape with Antique Ruins* (left) Clerk gets to grips



Franz Edmund Weirotter  
*Landscape with antique ruins*



*Glasgow*

with achieving a proper feel for masonry, as well as offering more variety of light and texture. The towers of *Pembroke Castle* and *Glasgow* (right) have a solidity and mass unseen in previous prints. Compare for instance another two prints from the same year –



*Lincluden Abbey*



*Cambuskenneth Abbey*

*Lincluden Abbey* and *Cambuskenneth Abbey*. One can immediately see the amount of progress he has made in the quality of architectural drawing.

Two further prints of 1773 make an interesting comparison – *Elan Stalker II* and *Farm House of Kersewell*. The former represents where he has come from, Kersewell where he is



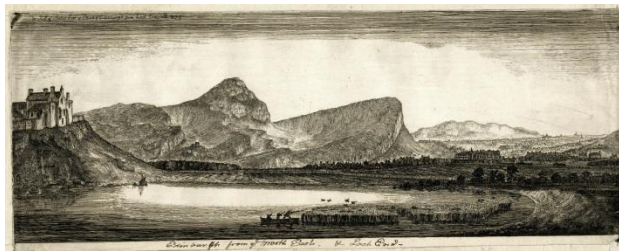
*Elan Stalker II*



*Farm of Kersewell*

heading to. In the Kersewell view, one can see Clerk's much improved technical control, the various parts of the landscape better described. The overall effect here is also much more natural, the scene more lifelike, the cluster of farm buildings (part of the greater Clerk land holdings as it happens) set off against the Pentland Hills, the foreground open and filled with light. Unfortunately this fine etching is unique in Clerk's collection. Perhaps its openly Dutch character did not appeal to him or it was not well appreciated for its lowly subject matter – it's even omitted from the fine collection of etchings donated to George III in 1786.





Arthur's Seat from Lochend II



View of Edinburgh from Write's Houses

The wider, panoramic view first seen in the Dumbarton etching is fully exploited in two of Clerk's largest plates, of Edinburgh. *Arthur's Seat from Lochend* and *View of Edinburgh with Writes Houses* of 1774 led Paul Sandby to write to say that he had "shewn them to several brother artists who are much pleased.....by them they conceive it to be one of the most Romantick cities in the world".



St Andrews from the West

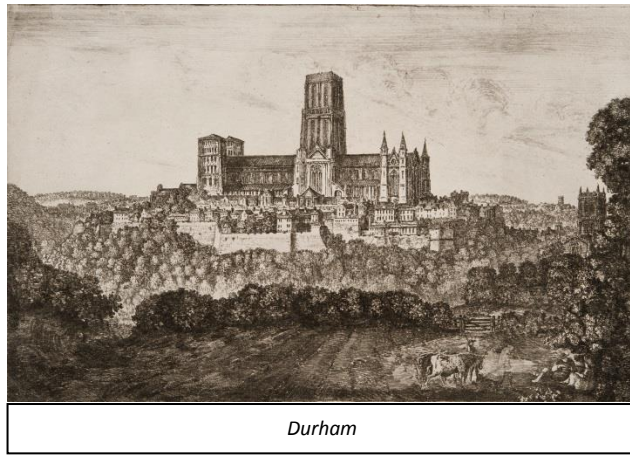


North Queensferry

*View of St Andrews* and *Leith from the West* are from the same period. As in *View of Edinburgh from Write's Houses*, there is more going on in the foreground, which Clerk makes more heavily shaded, offsetting the scenes behind. *North Queensferry* is the busiest of all, with ships and shoremen bustling around. This is characteristic of the 17th century Dutch artist Renier Nooms, known as Zeeman, whose sea scenes resonated with Clerk's interest in ships and things naval. By saying this I do not intend to minimise Clerk's designs, only to point out that this is another example where Clerk, in order to improve his images, incorporates established visual techniques. I never feel that he does this at the cost of his own invention. He assimilates ideas and re-presents them to suit his needs.



Renier Nooms, aka Zeeman  
Vier zeilschepen



Durham

*Durham* is one of his grander etchings. It is certainly an impressive image, the vantage point selected to show off the cathedral. The modulation of light over the cathedral walls is continued in the trees that line the slopes below. Clerk has gone to extraordinary lengths in his attention to detail. It is hard to remember that we are looking at the work of a self taught amateur artist printmaker who had only started on this journey four years before. Clerk must have spent a phenomenal amount of time in this practice.



Pont y Prydd

The *Pont y Prydd* is the second of the two Welsh views and is the first of three prints he made that reflect his interest in engineering. At 140 feet the bridge was the largest single span in the country. Designed by William Edwards the bridge was completed, after four attempts, in 1756. Clerk first drew it on his trip to Wales in 1766 and etched it around 1775. Note how he gives the bridge great prominence in the image by darkening the structure against the lighter background.



Perth Bridge

With *Perth Bridge*, Clerk was recognising the work of the renowned engineer John Smeaton, an Englishman who is regarded as the founder of modern civil engineering. Smeaton worked on many projects in Scotland, not least of which was the construction of the Forth Clyde

Canal in which Clerk was an investor. The construction of the Perth Bridge is another example of his work in Scotland as were the improvements of Banff and Peterhead harbours and the construction of Aberdeen Bridge.

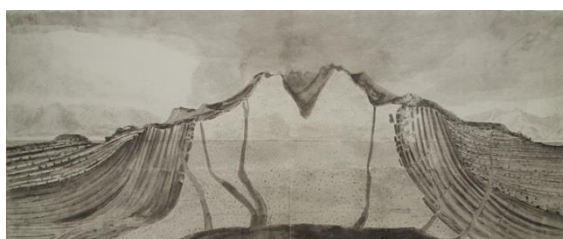


Eddystone Lighthouse

However one of Smeaton's most impressive achievements was the *Eddystone Lighthouse* by Plymouth. Although belonging to a group of later etchings I'll mention it here as I wondered for ages why Clerk bothered to go all the way to Plymouth to see this particular building. However, on discovering the Smeaton connection it made sense. At the time Smeaton's lighthouse was considered a marvel not only for being radical and innovative for its time (with the lighthouse built of granite blocks secured using dovetail joints and marble dowels) but for his pioneering use of hydraulic lime, a type of concrete that sets under water.

This is a good moment to introduce Clerk's close friend James Hutton as Hutton was also involved with the Forth Clyde Canal Project, as geology consultant and supervisor of works. Hutton is known as the founder of modern geological thinking and it was to Clerk that he turned when developing his new ideas on geological age. According to John Playfair, Hutton had communicated his idea to very few people, "to none but his friends Dr Black and Mr Clerk of Eldin". No surprise therefore that it was Clerk whom Hutton commissioned to provide the illustrations for his important seminal work *Theory of the Earth*. However

Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags



Detailed E-W section, Isle of Arran

Hutton died in 1797 before the parts which were to contain the drawings were published,



the collection disappearing from sight and not re-appearing until 1968. Clerk's drawings are admired for their accuracy and clear representation of Hutton's principles.



Antonie Waterloo  
*Apollo and Daphne*



Herman van Swanevelt  
*Flight in to Egypt*

In the meantime, Clerk was continuing to improve his etching technique. Prints by seventeenth century Dutch etchers such as Antonie Waterloo (left) and Herman van Swanevelt (right) were important to him in finding ways to bring a better naturalism to his drawing of foliage. On first sees this is in etchings such as *Dunfermline* of 1775 in which the



*Dunfermline*

trees take up the left half of the plate. By the time his etching career ends he has achieved such proficiency in his foliage as we see in *Craigmillar Castle from the South East* (left) and *Hillhead near Lasswade* of 1777 and 1778.



*Craigmillar Castle from the South East*



*Hillhead near lasswade*



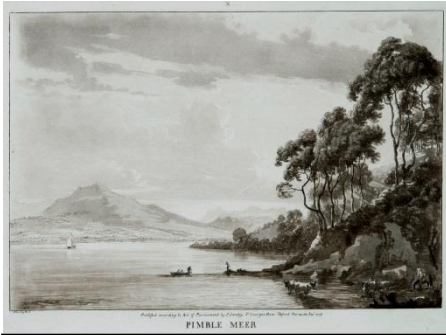
Let's just remind ourselves from where he started only eight years before. It has been a remarkable journey



There are two other aspects in Clerk of Eldin's etching career that deserve highlighting. The first is his diversion into softground etching and aquatint. Softground etching is a variation on the etching technique in which the artist uses a more rounded point in the drawing of the image, that results, as Sandby noted, in producing an outline like fine Italian chalk. Aquatint was method created to provide tones in a print that simulated watercolour wash, just as the term describes. Clerk learned how to do the former but aquatint was a closely guarded secret which Sandby was unwilling to share. Clerk continued to experiment with toning but with little success – as one can see in these three prints of *Dalhousie Castle II*,



*Loch Orr Castle* and *Adam's Hut*. Sandby wrote to Clerk *I perceive you have been trying at Le Prince's secret, know my good friend I got a key to it and am perfect master of it*. This is an example of one of Sandby's prints (left) and one, for comparative interest, by Le Prince.



Paul Sandby  
*Pimble Meer*

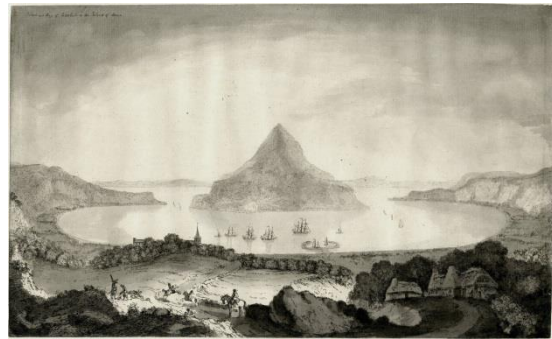


Jean Baptiste LePrince  
*Les Barques*

As for softground there are three marvellous etchings from 1777 – *Dalkeith from the North West*, *Bay of Lamash* and *Dumbarton Castle from the East*. In *Dalkeith from the North West* one can see clearly the thicker, softer style of line. The last two are only known



*Dalkeith from the North West*



*Bay of lamash*

through impressions to which a monochrome wash has been added, lending credence that Clerk had always hoped they would at sometime become aquatints.

The second aspect that I feel is important, and certainly as it pertains to how we perceive Clerk's work, is his use of the burin, the etching needle, directly into the copper. This is employed for several reasons, from improving a plate where poor biting of the acid has occurred and so to correct errors; or to conceiving its use as a feature in its own right. Certainly in the early years Clerk used the burin to make corrections, but in later prints the burin is used constructively to provide an increasing dynamic to the contrast of tone and shade.

One can see the difference by contrasting the two *Newark Castle* etchings, made at



*Newark Castle I*



*Newark Castle II*



similar time, in which the drypoint used in the surrounding trees and to the side of the castle walls of the first plate gives the scene more drama in comparison to the other. One could say that Clerk is being quite theatrical in this presentation. Drama is certainly a feature of the *Eddystone Lighthouse*, which we saw earlier, with its stormy sea and sky, and in



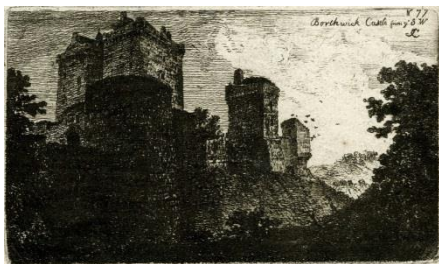
*Stirling from Kinneil*



*Eddystone Lighthouse*

*Stirling from Kinneil* where Clerk uses drypoint in the sky to emphasise the shaft of light breaking through the clouds to illuminate the town below.

In applying drypoint to enliven his scenes Clerk confirms to me that he should be regarded as a landscape artist and not a topographer. The artistic execution and vision of these etchings goes far beyond the nature of just recording. Take *Borthwick Castle from the South West*, where it should be said that he was in danger of overworking the plate, and



*Borthwick Castle from the South West*



*Haddington*

*Haddington* where it brings out the church's best features. But the finest, in my mind, is *Lochmaben Castle* which in the movement of lights and darks across the plate is a distinct



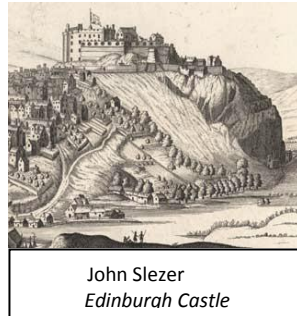
*Lochmaben Castle*

forerunner for later etchers such as DY Cameron. Clerk's ambition, his creativeness and willingness to experiment is central to our appreciation of him as a printmaker.

Clerk stopped making prints in 1778. There's no stated reason why but in the letter of 1779 to Richard Gough from which I quoted earlier, Clerk refers to his poor eyesight, and in a different letter from that same year he complains of his Reumatisme. But maybe it was just that he had achieved what he had set out to do, and reached a degree of quality that met

his original challenge. Whatever the reason, he went on to complete the other major project with which he was involved during that period, his *Discourse on Naval Tactics* which was first published, privately, in 1782.

So, where does Clerk fit into the history of Scottish Art and Printmaking? In many ways he stands alone. He is not influenced by preceding artists; at that time, in Scotland, landscape etchings were virtually unknown. Indeed landscape art was not widely appreciated. The most significant work was the engineer John Slezer's *Theatrum Scotiae*, a set of 57



John Slezer  
*Edinburgh Castle*

engravings of Scottish towns and buildings, published in 1693, of which this of Edinburgh Castle is a typical example – it doesn't quite have the mood of a Clerk, does it? The Runciman brothers also, Alexander and John, had made the occasional etching but not to



Alexander Runciman  
*Two Trees*



John Runciman  
*Landscape after Wouvermans*

any great extent. So in many ways Clerk was entering new territory.

Nor does Clerk leave any particular art legacy. A small group of etchings by Alexander Nasmyth made after 1790, are in a similar vein, but Clerk's work was not widely known



Alexander Nasmyth  
*Landscape with a Castle*



Alexander Nasmyth  
*Landscape with Loch and Distant Castle*



despite that his prints were regularly sold through Thomas Philippe, the printseller; perhaps just too few copies were actually printed. His reputation is temporarily revived with the two volumes printed by the Bannatyne Club in 1825 and 1855 but these were done solely for the membership, which stood at around 30 and 100 in these respective years. In effect his etchings drop out of sight, only to be rediscovered by the etcher Ernest Lumsden in 1924. Today, John Clerk of Eldin's reputation is well assured, his prints included in exhibitions on the history of Scottish landscape and as context within those on Robert Adam and Paul Sandby.

John Clerk of Eldin was the first etcher in Scotland to capture the character and spirit of the Scottish landscape. He reflects a Scotland that is beginning to look at itself in new ways. He stands at the head of a list that was to find its true measure much later, in the prints of D Y Cameron. Cameron's *Rowallan's Towers* of 1893 clearly lies within a tradition of the Romantick castle portrait as first outlined by Clerk, as does his *Drimmin* mentioned previously in respect of Clerk's *Lochmaben Castle*.



D Y Cameron  
*Rowallan's Towers*



D Y Cameron  
*Drimmin*

The legacy of John Clerk of Eldin comes too from his portrayal of historical buildings and ruins, some which no longer exist or have changed considerably. This gives today's historians information now lost. And we must not forget the large collection of prints, drawings, notebooks and writings that he bequeathed. This is a considerable resource for scholars of both Arts and Sciences. He was a remarkable man indeed.

Thank you.

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