

LETTERS TO A BUSY MAN

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John Blain came to Bute in 1761 at the age of 25. He became Town Clerk in April of that year, retaining the office until 1804 when he was made a baillie and a councillor. In the intervening years he was Sheriff Clerk, surveyor and landwaiter to the Customs House, surveyor of Taxes, clerk to the Justices and Commissioners of Supply, overseer for the North End roads and, briefly, factor to Bute Estate. He also farmed, and improved, Eskechraggan and was first president of the Bute Agricultural Society at the initial formation in 1806. As a notary public he was probably the only person on Bute qualified to handle land transactions and as a Writer he could act for clients in legal matters. The larger part of his income would come from employment as a lawyer because some of his offices yielded little. He records in his accounts in 1779 that the "sallary as Clerk of Supply for 1778 was £4:0:0" while "sallery allowed by My Lord Bute . . . £20:0:0" and "Law expences for the same discharges . . . £20:17:10" appear to have been paid to Blain from the Bute Estate factor for legal duties. During the same period he paid a total of £30:2:10½ for his rent of Eskechraggan, the land tax, including road and rogue money (a local tax levied for expense of arrest and detention of criminals), and packet money, so that it would appear that his legal emoluments were necessary income to this very busy man.

It was for his knowledge of legal affairs that two of the Bute Estate factors, David Blair and Peter May, often sought his advice which, combined with his local knowledge, during May's "factory" especially, made Blain's services invaluable to them.

Letters from David Blair, factor from 1765 to 1771, and Peter May, factor from 1778 to 1789, with a few from Alex (Sandy) May, son of Peter, who took over from his father in 1789, are preserved in the Argyll and Bute archives at Lochgilphead (although there is little correspondence in the files dated after 1782), and it is from these that the following extracts are taken. They reveal some aspects of daily life and social attitudes on late eighteenth-century Bute among a few of the people who helped to shape an expanding economy for agriculture and bring new industry to a town which had been in decline when Blain first arrived. The correspondence is necessarily fragmentary as it is probable that not all letters and notes written will have survived, and it is one-sided as John Blain's replies are not in the files. However, each letter does have, in his hand, the date received and the main content written at the top of a narrow panel made by folding the letter to the same size. This,

presumably, was his filing system and he would have had the letters stacked in such a way that the contents of any one lifted out could be seen immediately. There are no letters from the factors John Dunlop (1758 to 1763) or James Edington (1771 to 1778) but a letter from James Stuart Mackenzie to his brother, the 3rd Earl of Bute, written in July 1779 when he was taking much of the responsibility for managing his brother's Scottish estates, mentions that "we reckon within these last 15 years past there has been about £18,000 of your money absolutely thrown away on wild schemes of one sort or another . . ." so these men may not have been so conscientious in conducting day-to-day business correspondence. Alternatively, their letters may have been lost.

Certainly David Blair, about whom little appears to be known, was often in difficulties with management of finances and the activities of the tenants and may not have contributed much to the improvement of the estate. One of the first of his letters in November 1767 contains an appeal to Blain because, "The Fair being held on Wednesday makes demands on me for money from all the workers and servants about Mount Stuart and I'm still out of cash. Mr Colin McKay promised me £24 about this time. If he has either brought it or sent it home, please to get it and send it by the bearer Jⁿ Fraser. If not you'll be so good as to borrow that sum, either from the Collector or anybody that can spare it". At the bottom of the letter he adds, "If you can procure me any silver please to send it I cannot get the workers paid without change". That David Blair lacked confidence in his abilities seems clear when in another part of the same letter he asks Blain to send him, ". . . the heads of the minute sign'd by Baron Mure t'other day, till you can give me the prin^d minutes, as things may escape my frail memory that are to be done immediately".

Most of the correspondence deals with unpaid accounts and arrears of rent but David Blair finds space at the end of one letter to comment on Blain's recent wedding, "All here offer our joint compl^{ts} to you and Mrs Blain and do sincerely felicitate you upon your New State of Life. Wishing you all the joys of matrimony". That was in May, 1768 and in August of the same year a list of unpaid accounts and arrears of rent was sent to John Blain with direction about possible action, to which Blair added, ". . . there can be no difficulty in making out our accounts in that way, which (if you are *throng*) I shall do myself". Already John Blain was noticeably "throng" or "busily occupied, having a lot of work" according to the Concise Scots Dictionary.

Even during his first year as factor, in 1765, David Blair had the worry of endeavouring to collect the farm rents. His concern was that tenants paying some of the rent in kind, in this case bear or bere, a 4-row type of barley, would neglect the cleaning of the grain, which he had

arranged to sell to a Glasgow merchant. He asks Blain to make sure "to acquaint the Ten^{ts} of this and to let them know that if it is not properly dress'd it will not be received and that must be at their risk".

In 1767 he is asking Blain for information on some of the tenants "that such of them as there's any hopes of may be prosecute", and in 1768 he is suggesting action since, "Of necessity we must distress some of the Tenants who are in arrears. You'll therefore please to cause summon'd such of them as you think there's the greatest probability of their having money". In 1770 he was becoming exasperated at the lack of response from tenants in Bualochreg, Shalunt, Achawillig, Stuck and Bogany and remarks, "Tis odd that they will not part with nothing of their overstock to pay any rent when there's so great occasion for it".

Occasionally rumour reached him of stock to be sold not for the purpose of settling overdue rents. In November 1767 Blair sent an urgent note to John Blain, "I have reason to suggest that the tenants of Birgidale Knock (Glass & Mcffie) are about to dispose of the stock there and leave the rent unpaid. Wherefore now as Martinmas is past I would have everything there secured by a poind". He goes on to give details of the rent for 120 acres (£66), value of master's stock and cess, and adds, "I believe a Dec^t must be taken against them and a poind execute against them without loss of time otherways all may be lost".

Poinding is used often at this time, apparently in many cases to prompt payment, hoping that the poind will not be necessary. Some years later in 1780, Alex May comments in the account book which Blain kept, "I wish you would cause to poind him. He lives in Rothesay so that it can be easily done — perhaps it may fright him in to make payment". The sum in question was £1:19:0 $\frac{2}{12}$, owed by Rob. Duncan, sen., late Dunalunt, who still owed the balance of the farm rent after leaving. Alex May was dismissed in 1803 for several reasons, but one mentioned by John Blain in a report on the island's agriculture was his tendency to bully and threaten tenants who were slow in paying rents. A list of properties held by the Marquess on the island which Blain compiled in 1813 has remarks added in Blain's hand on the abilities of various tenants to pay including, "Quite able to pay", "now married to opulent man", "Wealthy", "Will pay cheerfull", "No hardship to him to pay" or in cases of hardship, "Poor — defer" or ". . . is indigent. His tenement burdened with debt to its value. He was a usefull partizan in the politics of 1788 being a member of the council — defer", which shows a more relaxed attitude than the one taken by Alex May.

David Blair had little time to relax in 1770 when letter after letter is full of the affair of Robert McConachy who had moved from Barmore to Scalpsie and was not farming the ground to Blair's satisfaction. In

March he writes, "I think of none other except Rob^l McConachy and I know not how far tis prudent to give him a sum^{ds} of Removal ag^l Whit next from Scalpsie lest it make him careless in plowing and sowing. He has never come near me to pay anything neither Crop, Rent nor Cess except £10 which he paid at entry: by the terms of his bargain he was to have paid a years rent then". There follows a list of the sums owed by McConachy and Blair adds, "... but he's such a villainous body that I know not how to behave and I wish the ground were well plow'd and sowed. Tis too much money to be in such hands. I'd wish to be directed by you which would greatly oblige". By May 1771 David Blair was asking John Blain to "have a poinding execute ag^l . . . Robert McConachy in particular who I hear sows his Land greatly short of what he ought to have done and the man to whom I promised the Scalpsay viz^d old Neil Jamieson is to be put in possession".

By July 1770 Blair is suggesting that the cows belonging to McConachy "could go if someone would offer the appraised value" or they could be "fattened on Inchmarnock tho' it will be hard to do as the milk is upon them". Alternatively it is suggested that "he" could have the cattle back to graze until Martinmas, "he finding caution for the performance . . . withal that he shall pay all expenses of herding and poinding". John Blain is told that one of the cows belongs to McConachy's son and is to be returned to him "as I'm informed he has suffered a good deal by his father already".

The mention of fattening beasts on Inchmarnock is not the only one as another letter talks of sheep to go over, but nowhere is there a reference to methods used to get the animals across the channel.

In early September Blair has to confess that a mistake has been made in the amounts of valuation at McConachy's entry to Scalpsie and he asks Blain to "look in to it and put to rights", but by September 20th an anguished letter begins, "I'm plagued to the heart with Neil Jamieson and Barmore; Neil says that his behaviour is such that he can bear it no longer". McConachy must have been intended to return to Barmore as from this time on he is frequently referred to by the name of that holding. Old Neil, his son, his two daughters, four cottars and sometimes his wife, were scything the corn crop and "Barmore binds and always tells them that they are working for him . . . I beg you'll fall upon some method to cause him to desist; Is there no way to put a stop to him as he's a very great hindrance to the work and at the same time is making an intollerable Joke of all that we have done . . ." and the letter ends, "Your immediate direction will greatly oblige". By October 3rd the situation has worsened and David Blair is asking Blain what legal step "is proper to be taken with Barmore".

McConachy was telling Old Neil that John Blain had not disapproved of what he was doing and had not told him to stop. "I daresay this is false", Blair comments, "but from Barmore's perseverance Neil believed it to be true. He must certainly be imprisson'd if it can be done legally. You'll therefore please to give the proper directions for executing it or any other legal measure you think expedient for hindering him from interrupting Neil in the proper management of the crop". By October 17th Neil Jamieson had told Blair that "for peace sake" he would agree to a proposal from McConachy that he should plough and sow the land again and then "quit the Land and Crop peaceably at May next". At this point David Blair had decided that he did not wish to be seen taking an active part in the proceedings telling Blain to "make up matters in this way and I shall agree to it but I do not chuse to be seen in the matter and therefore you'll please to take it upon you as of yourself". By October 26th Blair is writing to John Blain to suggest suitable men who could be put in charge of the harvest at Scalpsie. Old Neil had reported that Barmore had not put thatch on the stacks. One Adam Mitchell is mentioned, "but he is not returned from Dunoon Fair" and the letter finishes with the requests, "Please to mind my watch by the Post and bring the cash with you from Mr Dunlop by Jamie Stewart, you'll likeways send my plade and Table napkin by the bearer Jock". It can only be conjectured that David Blair has been so upset by the happenings at Scalpsie that his plaid and other belongings had absentmindedly been left at Blain's house or office.

The next communication is undated and begins, "I'm really tormented between old Neil and that wretch". This time Barmore had been telling Neil Jamieson that a paper given to the old man by Blain had appointed him, Barmore, an officer and he had "abused the poor old man". Blair repeats the plan to set someone else over the crop "to take care of My Lord's behove" and goes on, "Neither will I pass from the result which I wrote you of. If I could think of the proper way to resent it". He suggests that Blain would think "of makeing a visit at Barmore with me" and the plans for this visit are interesting. He thinks that *two* nights from home will be enough and asks Blain to "procure us a proper vehicle. If the Customhouse wherry can be got I believe it's the best we can expect for I suppose the Packet dare not venture lest she should not return in time to set out for Greenock on Thursday". He had already said "I'd chuse to set out next Munday" and it is difficult to imagine in 1790 that a journey from Rothesay to Mount Stewart (the most usual spelling in Blair's letters) would take such time and such planning. There is a letter from Peter May to John Blain in 1782, when a roup of unwanted articles was to take place at Mountstuart (the form used by

May) and May has been told that "the Kings Boat is to bring our neighbours from Rothesay, but if you have not already bespoke your seat I wish you could come a little Earlier". Sea travel was possibly more convenient than struggling with horses on muddy tracks especially when a number of people were involved, and roads other than the one between Rothesay and Mountstuart had to be travelled.

Whether the visit took place and if it did, what the result was we do not learn for there is only one last word of the affair in a letter dated November 26th when Blair writes, "Little did I think the Scalpsay crop was thrashing out under Barmore's direction and he sending it off to Largs at the very time fortune was given against him to remove". Blair intends to put a stop to this by writing to "Wilson in Largs accordingly next auction not to pay him the price nor to any in his name but to let me know what the price is and he may have the bargain if reasonable". Neil Jamieson must have finally obtained the tenancy because he was paying rent to Peter May in 1780, and in 1804 the tenant was John Jamieson.

Two last letters, one undated, and one written on November 28th 1770 are worth mentioning. David Blair and a companion are to go to Edinburgh for "our Coal Cause" and intend setting out on "Munday so as to get the Greenock Stage for Glasgow on Tuesday (she does not go on Wednesday) and take the stage for Edinⁿ on the Wednesday and Thursday otherways we cannot reach it in time to hear the Cause". A three hour or less journey in 1990 needed considerably more planning in 1770. In the undated letter David Blair is commenting to John Blain on action being taken by Charles Gordon, who may be an owner or a tenant, but who seems to be a sheep farmer on Bute or the mainland near Bute. "I hear," relates Blair, "that Ch. Gordon still persists in his intention of makeing a process of the sheep affair before the Court of Session and is quite deaf to the advice even of his friends against it. If this is really the case would you not think it advisable to require him . . . to make up his charge against the Gentlemen for the damages done by their Dogs and to ascertain the value by a proper attestation . . . the value of what of his sheep their Dogs destroyed, and not for any Expenses of plea". Unlike the present laws there seemed to be no set way to proceed in cases of sheep worrying of which this could be an early example.

To read the letters from Peter May to John Blain is to move into almost a different world although only eight years separate the end of one correspondence and the beginning of the other. Peter May had been commissioned to improve the running of the estate and from the earliest note it is obvious he is going to be in command of the situation. There is however one link between Blair and May. A note written from "Mt. St., Thursday's evening, 1767" requests that Blain attend a breakfast the

following day and "send lemons (if they are come) by the bearer". On November 4th, 1779, Peter May asks John Blain, "Pray can you procure among your friends a few lemmons we are run out here. Mr Oliphant drinks rich punch".

Summons to appear at Mountstuart at short notice became quite common as Peter May took up the reins of his "factory", and were usually requests for John Blain to perform in his legal capacity. On February 2nd, 1779, "Something has occurr'd here that requires the cognizance of a Justice of the Peace. I must therefore beg the favour of you to come out to Mountstuart this forenoon and bring our friend Kilmory along with you. Mr Clayton comes in on my horses and Kilmory and you can ride out on them . . ." May goes on to give alternative arrangements if either Blain or Kilmory are unable to attend and explains that a Justice is essential as "I have summoned the offender to the house of Mountstuart by 12'oclock this day". The letter must have been written at an early hour if it was to be taken into Rothesay in time for the justices to ride out again by midday.

In July 1780 Peter May proposes visiting the north end of the island on the following day and asks Blain if it is convenient for him to go along. He continues, "My plan is to breakfast at Kaimes and to set out from that along the East side", and he then suggests that Mr Neilson, the Road Engineer, should accompany them, "but you will need to give Neilson notice today; he is working near the Ascog Loch . . . I shall call on you tomorrow by 7 in the morning". In December 1781 another call to breakfast asks, "If it were convenient for you to make a step this length tomorrow to Breakfast with a view to proceed to Dunagoyle", and going on to explain that the visit has to do with arrears of rent May adds, "I need not tell you how averse I am from using what may be called harsh or expensive measures but with some such procedure may be necessary . . ." In May 1782 a note sent to Blain, "Were it convenient for you to come here before breakfast it would oblige me", has added at the bottom "I shall send a horse for you unless you advise otherways".

There were other occasions for invitations to Mountstuart. In July 1782 "poor John Moir's" burial is to take place at Kingarth at 4.0 o'clock in the afternoon and a "list of gentlemen is subjoined" to a letter to John Blain since "these gentlemen will be expected to take a glass at Mountstuart after the Interment."

Dinner invitations were issued on several occasions. In March 1781 "I have some letters by the post which I wish you to see, were it convenient for you to dine at MS^t today we could go over the subject of them". This letter is headed "Tuesday 9aCloak" and the horse is to be sent from Mountstuart as May adds below his signature, "John More

will be in Rothesay with the mare". In October 1782 again after the signature at the end of a long business letter, "The Sheriff dines here tomorrow — will you accompany him".

An indication of the friendly relations between the two families comes in a letter of August 1780 in which Peter May proposes "being in Rothesay early on Monday. I shall go and take a look of the Mill of Greenan for which I propose to lay spare wood in the Park of Barone. As you are connected with the Laird" — this would be Mr Stewart of Stewart Hall — "I think you should go along, at any rate I will call on you". They were then to attend a court sitting in Rothesay and "After the Court is over I think Mrs Blain and you with James and Susan should come to Mount Stuart along with me. Our Berries is in their prime and they taste better from the Bushes than any way else". During the following summer Mrs May must have been responsible for the invitation when May writes "I am to send the whisky" — a carriage — "tomorrow for Mrs Blain. I hope it will be convenient for her and Sue to come here for some days". In the same year May writes from Edinburgh "... Mrs Blain's Commission will be taken care of. I hope to get clear of this Expensive place in eight days time. When you have a spare hour be so good as call for our folks at Mount Stuart. With best compliments and many happy years". As this letter was written on January 6th and it is not his customary ending, it may be an acknowledgement of the arrival of a new year.

In August 1782 May tells Blain that they are to have a roup at Mount Stuart "of a great variety I won't say of great value" and after suggesting arrangements for Blain's clerk to be the auctioneer he asks, "Does Mrs Blain want anything? and whether she does or not I hope she will, if the day be good, spend an hour at Mount Stuart and bring Jamie along". According to the account book kept between May and Blain a tea kettle was bought for 5:0 and where the total amount owed by Blain has been noted there is a subtraction with the remark "Reduce the price of the Tea Kettle given in a present to Mrs Blain ... 5:0".

Even before the days of freezers families would have a beast killed to last the winter, salting down the meat not for immediate use and in November 1780 Peter May must have promised part of a cow to the Blain family and then had to apologise as "I find Mrs May has engaged herself to Mr. Thorburn" — the minister at Kingarth — "for a leg of the Cow I had intended for you — I am affraid to quarrel with the goodwife and the Min^t too, however I can send you a leg of her in the beginning of the week and I hope she will be fine Beef — Sandy tells me that Ronald McNicol has a very fine small Cow of excellent Beef".

Like David Blair, May was often in contention with the farm tenants and impatient with their reluctance to accept new ideas and adopt different farm practices, and in a letter to a friend commenting on the fine weather at the end of March 1779 and the forward condition of the verdure he remarks despairingly, "... not one lippie is yet sown in the Island, altho' the ground is abundantly dry. I pressed them to sow, but without effect. They all with one voice say the season is not advanced enough for them ...". In 1781 he is telling Blain, "I cannot approve of My Lord Bute's tenants being so keen of the Sheriff Court"; and goes on to cite two cases one of which "would have come very properly before a Justice of the Peace", while the other should have been "before the Baron Baillie". He knows that John Blain will be in agreement for "I cannot doubt your approbation of both these and in time comming I wish to avoid as much as I can their litigious disposition by pointing out that neither party will gain by going to law. I should be exceedingly pleased they paid you well for being an arbiter".

One case of a tenant going to the Sheriff Court took place in the latter half of 1779 when Alex. McConachy in Ardnahoe tried to argue that he should not have to pay the full rent as certain improvements had not been completed including enclosing ditches and hedges adjacent to Ambrismore and parts of the buildings although as May wrote, "... nobody has less cause of complaints for in 1770 his Byre and Stable were built and in 1772 two large barns were built and every article of Expense anent these houses made at Lord Bute's expense except thatching & that part I presume has never been understood nor customary to be made by anybody else but the Tenant". It was the Sheriff's interim finding which troubled May. He had already remarked to Blain that "... you, who wrote both the Tack and the minute" (for McConachy's tenancy of Ardnahoe) "must be able to explain them better than anybody" and on October 7th commenting on the finding that "Alex McConachy is entitled to payment for straw by him for his own house", he has a foreboding that this "will I am affraid, lead us into many difficultys". Presumably he envisaged other tenants attempting to get the same decision in their favour but no further reference to the matter appears in this collection of letters.

One of the two tenants in Nether Ardrosdale, Archibald Brown, was declared bankrupt in 1782 but insisted that he could continue farming although May did not believe this and wrote to John Blain, "Arch^d Brown was here today said a great deal of nonsense and concluded that he find caution for 5 years. I don't think he will be able to perform his promise and therefore I am anxious to have him removed & I need not point out to you that the ffarm is suffering much in the meantime and that if he

continues to hang with it his neighbour as well as himself will be ruined". The neighbour, Robert Stewart, was in to see May a few days later and "says he will be ruined by being his neighbour on account that the Farm is neither plowed nor sown as it ought". However he did not have to resort to a removal as he tells John Blain in a letter written in November 1782, "The bearer, Robert Brown in Gartnakyllie, came here today along with Arch^d Brown in Ardroscodale and has undertaken to stock and sow down the farm" and Peter May recommends that they accept this and do not proceed further to remove Brown.

There was one action taken in September 1786 which is recorded in a paper "written by John Blain at the behest of Peter May, Factor and Provost", when the tenant of Laigh Bogany and the previous tenant were both charged with rent arrears and "they disobeyed the charge given them" which resulted in their being apprehended and committed to the Tolbooth "therein to remain at their own expense ay and until they make payment of the debt". But the usual course of action was a summons to Mountstuart for a warning. In February 1781 May asks John Blain if he would "Be so good as remember to summond Ambrismore and his son to compear before Kilmory on Thurs. . . . I wish to make the too frequent practice of stealing wood more criminal than it appears to be".

Unauthorised seaweed or kelp burning was also frowned upon and Alex May wrote to Blain about the tenants in Ardroscodale in 1781, before the previously mentioned case, saying that he had written to warn them, "and this I did as Baron Baillie certifying that if they went on after such intimation they would be prosecuted — I likeways gave the same intimation to Robert Maconochie in person" — it would be interesting to know if this was the same Rob^t Maconocchie of Barmore who gave so much trouble to David Blair — Alex May is sure that his warning has been ignored and "I am told they are still going on. I therefore wish you to summon these people for their trespassing in open contradiction of the prohibition given them". In 1783 the tenant of Kilmichael, Joseph Shankland wrote to Blain petitioning for permission to continue to cut "wraik" for burning. He had entered into a new 19-year lease under the impression that this right would continue and had been informed "he would not be allowed the liberty as formerly and was obliged to leave off doing it ever since". He explains that because he could no longer use the kelp for fertiliser he had had to freight a boat to carry the shell grit from Inchmarnock.

The use of "otherways" and "likeways", instead of "likewise" is common throughout May's letters and while some of the phrases seem almost contemporary in use others are very much of the time. In a letter

about Rothesay business he tells Blain, ". . . spoke in his usual way a little ambiguous". May asks Blain to put the same questions to the man as he has "and in your own prudent ways try what they can be brought to. You need not take any notice that I had spoke yesterday . . . this affair is rather a little ticklish". A day or two later a letter about a property claim tells Blain of a young lady's representative who "kept aloof and spoke very like what he is, a horse Jokey", using "jokey" in the sense of a common countryman, as found in the song "Lassie with the yellow coatie". The use of difficulty as a verb is found in one letter, "Nor are we so much difficulted to find one . . ." and "I have wrote the Inclosed advertisement" would not be correct usage today. The "ff" instead of "F" was still used at this time as was reference to Largs as "The Largues" which can be seen in other documents of the time although the usage must have died out not long after.

There is an impression, reading these letters, that Bute had little knowledge of happenings in the outside world but it is more likely that foreign affairs were discussed over dinner rather than through this personal exchange of notes. In March 1782 May tells Blain "our newspapers give us a bad picture of government affairs — I pity and feel for Lord North. The situation of Great Britain seems exceedingly critical at present — Did you hear anything of Minorca? I suspect we have lost it and that our West India Islands are all in danger from the vast superiority of the French & Spanish fleets united together".

Heavy rainfall was common then too, because in the same letter May comments "You will readily agree with me that yesterday was as heavy and uninterrupted a downfall of Rain and Sleet as I ever saw or felt. At Mount S^t we were all afloat even within Doors as well as without and the Avenue from the Burnmouth is holed and trenched by the rills of water so that it is hardly passable". It was a rough winter because in the previous December ". . . this excessive stormy weather is terrible indeed. Last night frighted everybody here from an apprehension that some accident would happen to the house", but they only "lost a good many slates". In the autumn of 1782 "This good day and having so many Jobs going on has prevailed on me to postpone attending the Court today" is a mention of better weather but at this time Peter May was suffering from an eye infection which he mentions constantly as wind irritates it and "I find my eyes but very little better and that going abroad in this frost distresses me" so a fine day was a relief to him. In December 1781 he complains "My eye is so much inflamed that it is with difficulty I can write this note" and on the following Monday a business letter for Blain is written by a secretary.

A letter from June 1781 strikes a familiar note. "On looking through the different operations employed at MS this forenoon I observed James Gibson and Arch^d Wylie with their assistants absent from the work they had engaged with and had so far performed". He made enquiries and ". . . was further informed they had deserted their work here and engaged with Mr Anderson for leading materials to the Cotton Mill. Altho I am extremely desirous to help forward the Cotton Manufactory yet I cannot approve of Mr Anderson entering into engagements with people immediately employed in My Lord Bute's Work without even so much as signifying his intention to me". He suggests to Blain alternative methods of dealing with the situation but insists that the work on "dykes and fences" must be completed. Again the case is left in the air, as apart from a reference to Gibson and Wylie in July there is not another mention of it, and the postscript in the July letter returns to domestic matters when Blain is asked to "make my compliments to Mrs Blain and tell her I shall certainly expect her here tomorrow. She may bring the youngest lass along in the Chaise with her".

One case of which the ending is known concerned Margaret Mcfie about whom Blain is asked to file "a writ application ag^t Marg^t Mcfie who had hir'd as a serv^t but refused to fulfil her engagm^t". May insists that action ought to be taken and ". . . there are other circumstances which can be adduced to confirm the Engagement if the maid attempt to deny — such as her sending another maid to Mrs May to serve in her place and to ask if she would accept . . . in lieu of her service — I should not insist on forcing a servant for I should not think well of their service when it was obtained meerly by compulsion . . . but I think it extremely necessary that such steps be taken as will convince them they are not to be trifled with and that engagements of whatever kind ought to be kept". As this is happening a year after the incident with Gibson and Wylie it might be thought that Margaret Mcfie is suffering for others' offences. The first letter is in June 1782 and by July the maid is in prison and has a "child", which may have been the reason for her wishing to relinquish her engagement with the Mays. Her brother and another man, who may be the child's father have been to see Peter May when he writes to John Blain giving him authority to deal with the case. "I told them I had now no Concern — that it lay with the maid to obtain her liberation when she pleased. It is too trifling to make much noise about, at the same time the Girl's obstinacy should be humbled . . . or if the girl makes an appologie . . . or will pay all the fees occasioned by the Process I will agree to her liberation". On the same day from "MS half past 7^ok" an urgent note for Blain states "Upon acquainting Mrs May that Peggy Macfee was in

tail she expressed some anxiety lest her confinement should hurt her & wishes that you would liberate her, on condition that she make an acknowledgement of her conduct which has been very reprehensible . . . in a word every thing is left to you . . . settle it as you can . . . and were it not from a degree of compassion to her situation and that of her child the Law should certainly have taken its course, but I must yield to my wife's compassion".

The final letter in this file yielded an unexpected phrase which contradicts the idea that most of the sentiments expressed at the midwinter festival were conceived in the Victorian era. Alex May is writing to John Blain about summoning a tenant for arrears of rent in a letter written on December 25th, 1782, and the closing words read,

Wishing you a Merry Christmas,
I am Dear Sir
Yours sincerely,
Alex May"

Acknowledgements

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Spelling and abbreviated forms are retained as written, and it will be noticed that they are not always consistent.

The book "Papers on Peter May, Land Surveyor, 1749–1793" published by the Scottish History Society was invaluable for background information on the life of Peter May, and it can be borrowed from the Museum Library by Society members.