

Lord Elgin: Defender of aristocratic adventure and national treasures

By Tim Luckhurst

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At Broomhall House, ancestral home of the Earls of Elgin, ancient Greek stelae or grave markers adorn the walls. The relics, decorated with carved figures, are the bits of the Elgin Marbles the British Museum did not want. They were brought home to Fife by the 7th Earl in 1816 and remain at Broomhall, now the home of his direct descendant, Andrew Douglas Alexander Thomas Bruce, the 11th Earl of Elgin and Chief of the Clan Bruce.

His Lordship will be 80 next month. He walks with a limp caused by a leg wound received in the Normandy landings of 1944. He might be forgiven for taking things easy, but when it comes to defending the family name that is not in his nature.

This week he appeared on the *Today* programme to debate the latest demand that the Elgin Marbles be returned to Greece. Asked to comment on the belief that the treasures are stolen property, Lord Elgin replied, "Totally unfair and completely untrue," before proceeding to explain that everyone in Britain "should be proud of what was done," by his ancestor. The 7th Earl had the express consent of the Ottoman Empire to remove the marbles, he said. It was an act of conservation, without parallel at the time.

The real story is a little more complex, but it does not entirely justify the allegations of theft. The 7th Earl did not set out to take antiquities from the Parthenon. In 1799 when he became British Ambassador to Constantinople, his architect persuaded him that it was an opportunity to send a team to Athens to study Greek art and architecture. This would allow his Lordship to build fashionable copies when he returned to Scotland.

Elgin delegated the task to his secretary, an energetic young man called William Hamilton. At first nobody said anything about taking antiquities, but Hamilton found it hard to ignore the reality that Turkish forces then occupying Athens were harming some of the finest works of art in the world. The chaplain to the British embassy in Constantinople, Dr Philip Hunt, was appalled and persuaded his boss to ask the Turks for permission to transport the marbles to Britain.

Lord Elgin's request was made at an opportune moment. Horatio Nelson had just fought and won the Battle of the Nile, and British influence in the eastern Mediterranean was at its apogee. To the Turks it seemed wise to grant his Lordship's request to take away relics from the Acropolis. Elgin received a Turkish imperial decree authorising him to remove material.

The only surviving version of the document is in Italian. It uses the word *qualche*, which is usually translated as "some" but can also mean "any." It is a fine distinction, but Elgin interpreted it as *carte blanche*. He employed 300 men to strip hundreds of pieces of sculptured marble, including columns, pediments and 17 figures, from the Parthenon. By 1803 all of these were boxed awaiting shipment to Britain where, Elgin intended, they would be used to decorate Broomhall in Grecian splendour.

Most of the marbles got back to Britain safely courtesy of the Royal Navy. Lord Elgin was less fortunate. He was captured by the French and held prisoner until 1806. When he got home his world had fallen apart. His wife had left him. His diplomatic career was dead and his precious antiquities were the subject of vicious controversy. There was a general feeling that Elgin had gone too far. Wealthy Britons had been helping themselves to bits of ancient Greece for at least a century, but pillaging the most beautiful building in the world looked a bit off. The poet Byron summed up popular fury by carving into the rock of the Acropolis 'Quod non fecerunt Gothi, fecerunt Scoti' (What the Goths spared, the Scots destroyed).

Elgin was mortified. He offered the marbles to the British government for £72,240. It was what he calculated it had cost him to bring them home. The

government offered £35,000. Elgin accepted with poor grace. The controversy has echoed throughout the last 200 years. It may explain why the 7th Earl's present-day descendant has opted for a quieter existence.

The modern Lord Elgin does not need to appeal to the state for money. For many years he has farmed 1,500 acres of malting barley, one of the principal ingredients of whisky. That and a talent for rearing pedigree Aberdeen Angus bulls have generated enough revenue to keep Broomhall out of the hands of the National Trust. His Lordship believes in private property. Until the Scottish Executive passed its Land Reform Act, granting public access to private estates, he popped up occasionally in the letters pages of *The Scotsman* questioning the legitimacy of such reform.

For a man whose ancestors include Scotland's medieval hero king, Robert the Bruce, a governor general of Canada, two viceroys of India and a founding father of the Royal Society, Lord Elgin is an ostensibly low-profile character. But he has had his moments of excitement too.

He landed on the D-Day beaches days after the initial assault as a 20-year-old officer in a tank unit of the 3rd Battalion of the Scots Guards. Among his comrades were William Whitelaw and Robert Runcie. Elgin has said little about his role beyond the laconic observation that "I suppose the most terrifying thing for me was a British Royal Navy beach master with his beard and dog."

That understates things. Lord Elgin was hit by anti-tank fire while attempting to clear German soldiers out of a wood in Normandy. He was pulled from his tank unconscious and bleeding heavily. Amid the confusion, a telegram was sent to his parents reporting him missing presumed dead. The truth did not emerge until the young Duchess of Wellington, serving as an auxiliary nurse, spotted him in a clearing station and shouted "I recognise that boy!"

Elgin's family, sons Charlie, Alexander and Adam, daughters Georgina and Antonia, wife Victoria and seven grandchildren meet every August on the anniversary of their father's combat wound to celebrate his survival. The surgeon who patched him up at the time warned that his work would only last

for 40 years. Exactly four decades later the leg did flare up. Mud from Normandy was still inside the wound.

Elgin's reserve is relative. He is emphatically not ashamed of his most notorious ancestor. Visitors to Broomhall are shown sketches executed by the seventh earl while he was surveying Greek sites. When the subject of Freemasonry, a cause to which he is utterly dedicated, is raised he displays fierce pride. One of the reasons is that it connects him emotionally as well as genetically to the Elgin of the Marbles.

The present Lord Elgin served for two decades as President of the Scottish Amicable Life Assurance Society. He was once Chairman of the National Savings Committee for Scotland and Lord High Commissioner of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Between 1987 and 1999 he was Lord Lieutenant of Fife, and he has dedicated time and energy to the Boys Brigade as well as the arthritis and rheumatism trust. But Freemasonry really turns him on. According to one of his sons he believes it is "part of the warp and weft of public life in Scotland, and that it does fantastic work for charity."

He was Grand Master Mason of Scotland between 1961 and 1965 and is still Provincial Grand Master of Fife and head of the Royal Order of Scotland, a position that allows him to travel the world promoting Scotland and the contribution he believes has been made by the unique Scottish rite of Freemasonry.

Elgin has even expressed irritation that conventional history does not record that his great-great-great-grandfather, the 7th Earl, was a mason too. The man who took the marbles was initiated into the Freemasons in 1819. His Lordship has confirmed that his ancestor was "exalted into the Royal Arch and held the rank of Grand Zerubabel from 1827 until 1835."

He is passionate about Masonry and, in an interview with *Freemasonry Today*, confronted head on allegations of improper influence and secrecy. For him, neither of these attributes should have a central role in Freemasonry. He was critical of the "type of mason" who "unfortunately believes that because

they've taken the oath, there is no way they are going to divulge any information, for it might cause them to be chopped up."

Lord Elgin's aristocratic credentials are enough to secure him any introduction he might want without the assistance of fellow masons. But he has travelled the world on their behalf and has enjoyed adventures which, if not quite the equivalent of being held prisoner by Napoleon, seem to meet the standards of previous generations of Elgin adventurers.

The Shah of Iran once concluded that, if his country was to become a modern state, it must have its own branch of Freemasonry. He invited Lord Elgin to explain Masonry to him. Elgin describes meeting him as a "special memory" He says "We covered every possible subject and I think he knew very well what Masonry was all about, but at the same time he was constantly looking over both shoulders, guarding himself against some form of conspiracy, which might come into Iran under the modernising ideas of the west."

The meeting lasted twice as long as the Shah's staff had allocated. Lord Elgin explains "It was the most extraordinary meeting with a crown head I've ever had. Normally, in a meeting with the Queen, she presses a button, the door opens, and you're out. When we finally got out into the street, our Iranian friends were sitting there trembling with fear. They thought we'd been done away with."

In another of his roles, as chairman of the Keepers of the Quaich, an organisation that promotes Scotch whisky; Elgin brought Ronald Reagan to a meeting and nearly persuaded the former president to dance on a table.

As his 80th birthday approaches Lord Elgin is slowing down. He spends most of his time at Broomhall on the outskirts of the village of Charlestown that was built in the shape of an E to represent the family name. His life has extended the tradition of aristocratic adventure into the 21st century without attracting the attention still focused on the seventh Lord Elgin. But when his predecessor's reputation is impugned, the modern Elgin still responds with proof that blood is thicker than water. His children intend to maintain that tradition.

Life story

Born: Andrew Douglas Alexander Thomas Bruce, 17 February 1924, to the 10th Earl of Elgin and the Hon Katherine Elizabeth Cochrane). His great-great-great-grandfather was the 7th Earl of Elgin (right).

Family: Married 27 April 1959, to Victoria Mary Usher, daughter of Major Dudley George Usher and Antonia Mary née Wilkinson; 3 sons, 2 daughters.

Education: Eton, Balliol College, Oxford (BA, 1949).

Titles: Elgin, 11th Earl of; Kincardine, 15th Earl of; Lord Bruce of Kinloss; Lord Bruce of Torry; 37th Chief of the Name of Bruce.

Career: Farmer, Lord Lieutenant of Fife (1987-1999), Lieutenant, Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland, President of the Royal Scottish Automobile Club, President, Scottish Amicable Life Assurance Company (1975-1994), Chairman, National Savings Committee for Scotland (1972-1978), Lord High Commissioner, General Assembly, Church of Scotland (1980-1981), President of the Royal Caledonian Curling Club (1968-1969) Grand Master Mason of Scotland (1961-1965), Provincial Grandmaster of Fife, Head Royal Masonic Order of Scotland.

He says: "There is a terrible attack on at the moment. Every single old institution is being attacked."

They say: "The current Earl appeared confident that his notorious ancestor was inspired by his Masonic membership." - interview in *Freemasonry Today*