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C. James Taylor
University of South Carolina

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A Review

Making the Illegible Intelligible

C. JAMES TAYLOR

The Letter Book of James Abercromby, Colonial Agent: 1751-1773. Edited by John C. Van Horne and George Reese. Richmond: Virginia State Library and Archives, 1991. Pp. lvi, 471. Cloth, \$40.00.

Most documentary editing projects, particularly those that print incoming letters in addition to those by their subject, have at least one correspondent whose handwriting poses a challenge. If the letters are important and numerous enough someone will master the hand and provide reasonably accurate transcriptions. The contribution varies according to the significance and volume of difficult material. Occasionally an important body of papers remains unused (or at least underused) because the condition, handwriting, or some other impediment deters scholars who would otherwise consult the papers. *The Letter Book of James Abercromby, Colonial Agent: 1751-1773* is an edition of important prerevolutionary letters that previously had been largely untapped because Abercromby's scrawl proved too daunting to historians. Transcription of an accurate text should be a goal for every edition; for this project it provided a challenge and motivation as well. One only has to "read" a few pages of Abercromby's hand to appreciate the accomplishment.

The letter book along with his other papers and books remained in the possession of the Abercromby family for almost a century after his death. In the early 1870s London booksellers purchased the collection and from there items were sold and dispersed. A note in the letter book dates its presentation by the Virginia Daughters of the American Revolution to the State Library and Archives as 22 February 1919. Jon Kukla's foreword to the edition notes that while the manuscript has been available to scholars for seventy years, its usefulness has been limited because "its scrawled text [is] virtually indecipherable" (xix).

The Letter Book of James Abercromby, Colonial Agent: 1751-1773 is the collaborative effort of two scholars with

extensive documentary editing experience. George H. Reese, former director of the Center for Textual and Editorial Studies in Humanistic Sources at the University of Virginia, has published numerous editions dealing with Virginia history ranging chronologically from *John Pory's Proceedings of the General Assembly of Virginia, July 30-August 4, 1619* (Jamestown: Jamestown Foundation of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1969) to *Journals and Papers of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 3 vols. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1966). He retired from the University of Virginia faculty in 1983. John C. Van Horne, currently director of the Library Company of Philadelphia, is an editor of the recently completed *Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*,¹ and includes among his publications *The Correspondence of William Nelson as Acting Governor of Virginia, 1770-1771* (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1975) and *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of Dr. Bray, 1717-1777* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

Abercromby (1707-1775),² a member of a well-established Scottish family, had from the beginning of his career an education (Westminster School, Leyden University, and Lincoln's Inn) and the necessary connections in government, society, and the military to assure an able and diligent man success. In an age when Great Britain's empire became a field of opportunity for Scottish soldiers and administrators, Abercromby's career and his writings reveal a man who acted in and understood how the prerevolutionary Anglo-American world worked. His flaw, which he shared with virtually every other non-American Briton who mastered the system, was that he interpreted the expanding colonial wealth and population solely in terms of British power.

Abercromby launched his American career when he arrived in South Carolina in 1731 to serve as attorney general and advocate general of the Court of Vice Admiralty for the colony. Rather than a simple placeman, Abercromby became active in South Carolina affairs, even serving twice (1739-42, 1744) in the Commons House of Assembly. Despite leaving South Carolina permanently in 1744 and never being officially retained as that colony's agent, he maintained connections with

C. JAMES TAYLOR is editor of the Papers of Henry Laurens at the University of South Carolina at Columbia.

the colony and cooperated with its agents in London. For some time South Carolina Governor James Glen employed Abercromby as his personal agent as did North Carolina Governor Gabriel Johnston. The edition contains letters which shed light on these private agencies. The North Carolina legislature appointed him its agent in 1748; evidence suggests that he had acted unofficially in that capacity even earlier. Abercromby's original two-year term was twice renewed by the General Assembly, and he continued to act officially for North Carolina until 1758. Because some of his salary and expenses due from his North Carolina agency depended on a pending parliamentary grant, he continued working in that colony's behalf until 1760. Many of the letters in this edition concern his North Carolina agency.

Virginia maintained his services in various capacities longer than any other colony. Beginning in 1752 as a special agent to present two addresses to the Crown on behalf of the colonial government, he served from 1754 to 1759 as agent for the governor and council, and after 1759 as one of Virginia's two agents (the House of Burgesses appointed its own). Abercromby continued his Virginia connection until 1774, and the contents of the edition most often concern that agency.

Abercromby and the other colonial agents performed duties that could be likened to those of a modern lobbyist. It was their primary task, whether employed by the governor, the legislature, or both, to expedite their clients' affairs by supplying the administrative boards with information. In an age of bureaucratic expansion, the agents had a real purpose. Without their intervention the otherwise unrepresented colonial governments would have had no dependable advocates. Abercromby proved to be an effective and industrious agent in large part because he knew the best way to maintain his American clients was to do their bidding and keep them informed. The letter book provides many excellent examples of how he provided service while at the same time protecting his own financial interests.

In addition to being actively involved in Anglo-American affairs for forty-five years, Abercromby wrote two lengthy treatises recommending reform of the constitutional authority over the colonies to assure a more centralized control of the burgeoning wealth and population of the American empire. A recent edition of these heretofore unpublished works finds Abercromby's writing constitutes "the fullest, most systematic, and most original contemporary analysis of the British imperial system as it existed on the eve of the American Revolution."³ Abercromby's motivation in producing these studies was to promote himself and improve his stature by providing a service to the political powers in Great Britain to whom he believed he owed his place.

Despite a long and intimate relationship with the col-

onies, his plan revealed "little sensitivity to the ancient aspirations of colonists for an equality of rights with Britons in the home islands."⁴ Reading Abercromby's colonial correspondence, as found in the *Letter Book*, with the knowledge that he could not conceive of the people who employed him for so many years as anything but politically and legally inferior helps explain why Britons with less knowledge or experience in American affairs found it impossible to understand the colonial reaction to the new imperial regulation after 1763. Abercromby, a member of Parliament from 1761 to 1768, demonstrated his concern for his connections in the administration over those of the Americans by voting against the repeal of the Stamp Act.

The letter book contains about 390 entries, almost exclusively letters, reports, and accounts from Abercromby as agent to the various individuals and colonial institutions for whom he acted. Most of the entries are in his wretched hand, with about 75 entries by a clerk. The last scholar, prior to the editors of this volume, to attempt to employ the letter book in a significant way was Ella Lonn in her book *The Colonial Agents of the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945). Her topic necessitated her grappling with it. She used it extensively, citing and quoting from it almost eighty times. A closer examination, however, reveals that she generally avoided those entries in Abercromby's hand, quoting them only four times (and three of those efforts contained substantial errors). Lonn, like almost everyone else who has attempted to use the letter book, complained about Abercromby's "execrable handwriting." In fact she commented at least three times, including a lengthy bibliographical note, about "the vagaries of Abercromby's writing and spelling [which] renders his pages often almost undecipherable."⁵

Two respected studies about colonial agents published in the 1960s mention him but hardly feature him as a significant figure. The supposedly unfathomable letter book was barely mentioned in each. Jack M. Sosin, *Agents and Merchants: British Colonial Policy and the Origins of the American Revolution, 1763-1775* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), acknowledged Abercromby as an important figure but mentioned him only twice. Sosin cited the letter book three times but in each case the letter was in a clerk's hand. It appears that he may have passed over the letters Abercromby entered. Michael G. Kammen, *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), cited the letter book only for letters entered by the clerk. Kammen's comment in his annotated bibliography that "James Abercromby's letter book is in the Virginia State Library in Richmond. But most of these drafts are illegible" suggests that he too did not take full advantage of the source.⁶

The project to edit the Abercromby letter book in the possession of the Virginia State Library and Archives grew out of another closely related edition, George H. Reese's *The Official Papers of Francis Fauquier, Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, 1758–1768*, 3 vols. (Charlottesville: Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1980–83). Because little of the original correspondence to Fauquier was extant, Reese had to consult other sources, most often the writers' retained copies. Abercromby, as Virginia's agent throughout Fauquier's administration, corresponded regularly with the lieutenant governor. In order to complete the Fauquier edition Reese had to master about 14 percent of items in Abercromby's letter book. And, in doing so he had to come to terms with the handwriting problem. He revealed his frustration in this statement from his editorial method:

James Abercromby's letter book requires special comment. His hand writing is difficult to read, and very often the editor has had to transcribe a word as what it ought to be according to sense or idiom or grammar. A secretary turned out manuscripts of exemplary neatness and legibility, but these Abercromby often altered with deletions or insertions of remarkable slovenliness, of the sort he put into his holograph manuscripts.⁷

Reese, thus having provided the transcriptions for 54 of the letter book entries, accepted the challenge to agonize through the remaining 330 plus items. These transcripts were then "refined" by John C. Van Horne to meet the editorial standard established for the Abercromby edition.

In some textual matters the earlier edition by Reese, although not offering answers, at least better explains the problems a reader may encounter when using and attempting to understand the entries in Abercromby's letter book. Merely reading the difficult handwriting, while an accomplishment, is only part of the process. What in fact are these entries? Drafts? Retained Copies? Summaries? Why are the entries copied in such an apparently erratic manner? The edition prints the items in strict chronological order while the earliest letter appears on page 304 of the manuscript. Reese notes in the Fauquier *Papers* that one copy of an Abercromby letter, possibly a recipient's copy, has been discovered elsewhere and that it "is markedly different from the letter-book manuscript."⁸ More discussion of the organization and meaning of the letter book is wanted. In the foreword, the editors dismiss another James Abercromby letter book for the years 1743–50, held at the North Carolina State Archives, because it "was found to contain no material related to Virginia's provincial affairs" (xx), thereby ignoring any potential it might hold for understanding the 1751–74 letter book.

The relationship between the Fauquier *Papers* and Abercromby *Letter Book* does not end with the text.

Most of the annotation for the Fauquier items in the *Letter Book* also appeared in the earlier work. In an age of limited budgets and demands for expeditious publication it certainly makes sense not to redo extensive research, especially when it is the work of the same scholars. The brief mention, however, in the acknowledgments that permission had been obtained from the Virginia Historical Society to use "some of that annotation . . . that appeared in George Reese's three-volume edition of Fauquier's *Papers* . . . in modified form" (xlvi) hardly alerts the reader that actually much of the excellent work had appeared word for word before. In fact, the space devoted to these notes might have been reduced along with the length of the volume if mere references to the Fauquier *Papers* annotation had been employed. Disregarding the originality of some of the work, the annotation supplied by Van Horne is excellent. In addition to the identification and numerous explanatory notes, Van Horne provides some textual comment, but hardly enough.

Unfortunately, the statement of editorial method contains no mention of the treatment of cancellations or interlineations, of which there are many. In fact most of the cancellations are silently eliminated and the interlineations are brought down (or up) to the line where the editors believe they make the best sense. The grossest examples of altered text, for instance the 24 June 1754 letter to the North Carolina Committee of Correspondence, where the entire entry is crossed out and rewritten under the following day's date (113–16), are treated in text notes which identify the "substantive differences" in the revision.

The editors' silent elimination of the apparently non-substantive crossed out portions and careful but equally silent incorporation of Abercromby's insertions seem to work—most of the time. A brief plunge into the manuscript revealed that there are instances of large portions of crossed out text (as much as twenty-five lines) that pass with no editorial comment. Even if the canceled material is not retrieved, most readers would prefer to be informed of such alterations.

Abercromby's 9 May 1763 letter to Fauquier (414–16) provides an illustration of problems that can arise when interlined words are printed but not identified as an insertion. (See illustration.) The passage in question includes Abercromby's original thought, some cancellation, and three lines of closely penned interlineation. The original text reads:

Lord Shelburne is now head of the Plantation Office but its generally said aims at the Pay Office [*canceled*] thus from this short Sketch of the Ministerial Picture you see that it is not quite finished. Abercromby set off the beginning and end of the interlineation with an "(A)"; it reads:

(A) the D of Bedford returns to France as Ambassador [*canceled*] but while and has resigned the

upon himself— Lord Shelburne is now head of
 the Plantation Office but its generally said (A) the D of Bedford
 returns to France as Ambassador but while and has resigned the office of Privy Seal in conse-
 quence Lord Holland who aims at the Pay Office is not inclined to resign his Pay Office (A) thus
 from this short Sketch of the Ministerial Picture you see that it is not quite finished— I do not find that the

James Abercromby to Francis Fauquier, 9 May 1763. An unidentified interlineation. Page 265 of the manuscript; page 415 of the edition (courtesy of the Virginia State Library and Archives).

office of Privy Seal [canceled] Ld. Holland who is not inclined to resign his pay office (A).

The insertion is combined with the original passage in the *Letter Book* in a fashion which disregards context:

Lord Shelburne is now head of the Plantation Office but its generally said (A) the D of Bedford returns to France as Ambassador but while and has resigned the office of Privy Seal in consequence Lord Holland who aims at the Pay Office is not inclined to resign his Pay Office (A) thus from this short Sketch of the Ministerial Picture you see that it is not quite finished.

The editors further muddy the waters by offering the following note after the first (A)—“The significance of this parenthetical letter (and the one several lines below) is not known.” The inclusion of the interlineation with no comment except this meaningless (A) footnote will befuddle most readers and force them to the manuscript.⁹

The index, which was not prepared by the editors, is barely adequate. It contains almost exclusively proper name entries with little thought given to long strings of undifferentiated page numbers. Only a few of the major entries like “Great Britain,” “North Carolina,” and “Virginia” have significant subentries that will facilitate research.

This ambitious “translation” of James Abercromby’s letter book is a valuable contribution to the prerevolutionary history of Virginia, as well as that of provincial North Carolina. It is hard to imagine that the studies on colonial agencies mentioned above would not have made better use of the letter book in its edited form. New studies of the colonial agents will be unable to dismiss James Abercromby’s “illegible” letter book. Considered in conjunction with the Jack P. Greene, Charles F. Mullett, and Edward C. Papenfuse, Jr., 1986 publication *Magna Charta for America* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society), the first edition of Abercromby’s treatises on Great Britain’s American

colonies, the *Letter Book* will promote new research into Abercromby and the other agents’ roles in the Anglo-American world on the eve of the Revolution.

NOTES

1. John C. Van Horne, “Drawing to a Close: The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe,” *Documentary Editing* 11 (1989): 63–69.

2. The biographical information in this review has been drawn from the introductions to the *James Abercromby Letter Book* and Jack P. Greene, Charles F. Mullett, and Edward C. Papenfuse, Jr., eds., *Magna Charta for America: James Abercromby’s “An Examination of the Acts of Parliament Relative to the Trade and the Government of Our American Colonies”* (1752) and “*De Jure et Gubernatione Coloniarum, or An Inquiry into the Nature, and the Rights of Colonies, Ancient, and Modern*” (1774) (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1986).

3. Greene, Mullett, and Papenfuse, Jr., eds., *Magna Charta for America*, 34.

4. *Ibid.*, 23.

5. Lonn, *Colonial Agents*, 204, 370, 402.

6. Kammen, *Rope of Sand*, 332.

7. Reese, *Fauquier Papers*, 1:xxv.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Reese’s source note to this letter in the *Fauquier Papers* admits some confusion over this portion of the document. “The comment on political events beginning with ‘Lord Shelburne’ is extremely hard to read, and it is not clear where Abercromby meant to insert some words in this passage” (Reese, *Fauquier Papers*, 2:949). This is much more satisfactory than the treatment in the *Letter Book*. Another possible, and more sensible, reconstruction with a slight alteration from the editors’ reading would have two insertions with the first (A), indicating that the one beginning “the D of Bedford” should be moved in the text to the place where the second (A) appears. It would then read: “Lord Shelburne is now head of the Plantation Office but its generally said aims at the Pay office [but while Ld Holland who is not inclined to resign his pay office] [the D of Bedford returns to France as Ambassador and has resigned the office of Privy seal] thus from this short Sketch of the Ministerial Picture you see that it is not quite finished” (The arrows in the text indicate the beginning ↑ and the end ↓ of the insertions.)