



Findlater, James Ogilvy, Earl of (1750-1811)

by Wolfgang Nedobity

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James Ogilvy, the 7th Earl of Findlater and 4th Earl of Seafield, was an accomplished amateur landscape architect and philanthropist of the late eighteenth century. He promoted the English landscape garden in mainland Europe, where he spent lavishly on public works and "improvements of the scenery."

Ogilvy's decision to live abroad was a not uncommon choice of wealthy Englishmen and Scotsmen with same-sex sexual interests in the eighteenth century. In Europe his discreet practice of homosexuality was accepted by society as an unacknowledged quid pro quo for his sponsorship of public improvements. After his death, however, scandal erupted when he was outed by his own relatives in Scotland.

Born on April 10, 1750 at Huntingtower Castle, Perthshire, the seat of his maternal grandparents, Ogilvy grew up in Cullen, Banffshire, where his father owned enormous tracts of land and industrial property. Educated at Oxford University, he enjoyed a reputation for classical scholarship, in particular for his knowledge of the Roman poet Virgil.

In 1770, after his father's suicide, Lord Findlater inherited his family's vast estates, including Cullen House. The estates in Scotland yielded about £40,000 per year, an enormous sum that gave him the freedom to travel and to reside abroad.

In 1779, Findlater married Christina Teresa Murray in Brussels, but two years later, he left her and lived abroad for most of the rest of his life, especially in Dresden and Carlsbad.

In spite of his travels Findlater kept involved in all decisions concerning his estates and employed the leading architects of the day to construct neoclassical buildings. For example, he commissioned Robert Adam to develop plans for a new house at Cullen and James Playfair to redesign the existing house and the adjoining kitchen garden. In 1773, James Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson viewed the estate on their journey to the Hebrides and noted that it was "admirably laid out."

Findlater's decision to relocate to Europe was no doubt strongly influenced by his homosexuality. He may indeed have been unofficially banished for his "unnatural transgressions." In any event, like his younger contemporary George Gordon, Lord Byron, among many others, Findlater realized that he could not live the life he desired in the United Kingdom.

Between 1793 and 1810, Findlater made 14 trips to Carlsbad, the foremost spa of the Austrian Empire. Enamored of the city, he cultivated its park land and generously donated to its charities.

In 1801, he erected the so-called Findlater's Temple in Carlsbad in gratitude for the benefits he received from the local waters. This neoclassical gazebo with six Ionic columns supporting a semicircular cupola no longer offers a beautiful view of the Tepla valley because it has been completely overgrown by trees.

Findlater's generosity to Carlsbad was honored by a monument that still exists today: the Findlater Obelisk.

It was dedicated to him--"a noble-hearted friend and a beautifier of nature"--by the population of the spa in 1804.

In 1808 Findlater met the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in Carlsbad. Goethe would still tell anecdotes about him many years after his death in 1811.

Despite his association with Carlsbad, Lord Findlater's primary investment abroad, however, were the vineyards at Loschwitz near Dresden. Initially motivated by his interest in wine, he managed to acquire five of the eight major vineyards in the region.

Although Findlater produced little wine from the vineyards, their picturesque location above the Elbe river valley appealed to him, especially the gorgeous view over to the Erzgebirge mountains in the distance.

With the help of Johann Georg Fischer, his close companion, confidant, secretary, and probable lover, Findlater began, by the end of 1805, to turn this site into a beautiful landscape garden with precious shrubs and trees on its terraces.

Later, Findlater commissioned the architect Johann August Giese of Gotha to construct a magnificent palace in neoclassical style. It was subsequently replaced by the Lingner Palace, but in its time it was considered "the most beautiful residence in Dresden."

Lord Findlater died on October 5, 1811, soon after construction of his palace was completed. Findlater's sole heir was Johann Fischer, who had already received the Eckberg estate and the manor of Helfenberg from him.

Fischer, whose wife divorced him when she surmised the nature of his attachment to Findlater, was subsequently sued by the aristocrat's Scottish relatives. They went to court claiming that the bequest to Fischer had been made in pursuit of lewdness. Their suit, which created a scandal, was successful. They were able to keep the estates in Scotland as family property but at the expense of Findlater's reputation in the United Kingdom.

When Fischer died years later, at the age of 87, he was buried in Findlater's tomb at the cemetery around Loschwitz Parish Church.

Findlater bears comparison with such other eighteenth-century British amateur architects as Horace Walpole and William Beckford, who shared the Scotsman's sexual proclivities. Although Walpole did not live abroad, he introduced the Gothic Revival style in architecture and decoration into England, transforming his family's Palladian mansion at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, into a fanciful medieval castle. Beckford, a social pariah in England because of his homosexuality, lived in Portugal for ten years before returning to his family estate in Hampshire, where he built his immense mansion Fonthill Abbey.

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About the Author

Wolfgang Nedobity holds university degrees from Salzburg and Liverpool. He has published on Angelica Kauffmann, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and Lorenzo Da Ponte, as well as on gay literature and society of the eighteenth century. He resides in Vienna.