

ART. IX – *Corby and the Corby Giant*. By W. A. J. PREVOST.

SIR John Clerk of Penicuik (1676-1755)<sup>1</sup> contributed much to the cultural life of Scotland.<sup>2</sup> He was a scholar, antiquary, architect, a most progressive landlord, and a man whose advice was much sought after. He will always be remembered by his *Memoirs*<sup>3</sup> and by his journals which are records of his various “trips” into parts of Scotland and into England. Four of his trips into Cumbria have been published in *Transactions*. On one occasion he journeyed to see his son who was at the college at Lowther,<sup>4</sup> which is described in this volume (p. 103 ff.).<sup>5</sup> There were times on these trips when Sir John stepped aside to see his friend Thomas Howard of Corby Castle, a place which Thomas had inherited in 1708 on the death of his father William.<sup>6</sup> The two men had something in common, for Thomas was interested in his property, had planned to do much to improve it, and no doubt Sir John could offer sound suggestions from time to time.

It was in the spring of 1724 that the baronet and Alexander Gordon, “a great lover of antiquities”, took a journey into England to observe the coal works at Newcastle and to see Hadrian’s Wall.<sup>7</sup> On their way they stayed at Naworth Castle, at a “villa” of Charles Howard, third Earl of Carlisle, and then, “still keeping along the wall, we came to Corby Castle, where the proprietor, one Mr Howard, made us stay to dine with him.” He was there again in September 1734.<sup>8</sup> Sir John, with his wife and three of the family, were staying in Carlisle and went out for the day to Corby where they were entertained by Mr Howard “with wine and good ale”. They walked round the policies which Sir John has described in his journal, but of this more hereafter. His last visit to Mr Howard was in August 1738 when he was on his way back from Scruton in Yorkshire, where he had been staying with his friend, Roger Gale, the famous antiquary. It would appear that his host had been ill, for on arrival at Corby Sir John writes that “I found my Acquaintance Esquire Howard had vastly improven”.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless the two men never met again for Mr Howard died in 1740, when he was succeeded by his son Philip, then only ten years of age. The last recorded visit to Corby was in August 1741,<sup>10</sup> to “the house of my deceased friend Esquire Howard . . . and”, writes Sir John, “as I had seen the beuties of this place frequently before, I rode out only to see the woods and fish ponds.”<sup>11</sup>

To return to the 1734 visit to Corby: surely Mr Howard showed them round “the place” which Sir John writes was “so full of natural beuties that I think no place of my acquaintance in Britain is equal to it”. He had much to say about what they saw but the following extracts must suffice.

As Corby Castle stands on a rock it affords a very agreeable winding walk down to the river where there are some artificial grotoes that look very pretty. On the river side is a large walk, haveing on the one side the river and on the other a high bank covered with wood and beautified all along with grotoes and statues of the rural deities . . . The statues are all of stone but not very well done . . . They stand here and there on the banks amongst large oakes and are naturally enough disposed. There is one of these statues representing Polyphemus which serves as a vista to this fine walk. It stands near the cascade and is about 12 feet high, of 3 stones not at all disproportionable.



PLATE I. – Polyphemus, or the Corby Giant, some time before 1914.

He has something to say about a temple of “the Dorick order” at one end of the walk, and at the other end “another temple with a portico and piedment very well finished.”

Before the party left Corby Mr Howard showed them a passage in the fourth book of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where there is a description of the Garden of Eden “which”, writes Sir John, “very near resembles the description one wou’d give of Corby Castle.”

So on he fares, and to the border comes  
 Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,  
 Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,  
 As with a rural mound, the champaign head  
 Of a steep wilderness . . .<sup>12</sup>

and so the description continues. It is perhaps only a coincidence that Gordon Nares, in an article about Corby Castle recently published in *Country Life*,<sup>13</sup> quotes Shakespeare's line "This other Eden, demi Paradise" and writes "removed from its context this short excerpt from a famous passage perfectly describes the landscaped setting of Corby Castle on the banks of the River Eden." There is also no doubt that Thomas Howard appreciated his inheritance for which he had a strong feeling of attachment. This is evident in his description of Corby, a manuscript copy of which he gave to Sir John. Dated 1733 by the baronet, it survives among the Clerk Muniments in the Scottish Record Office.<sup>14</sup>

Corby is situate on the half pace of a steep riseing hill, containing an Area, in the midst, of about 600 feet in breadth, and 800 in length; thence ascends the forehead of a fair green field, inclosed on each side, with tall Trees, and crown'd at top with a large Oak wood. The house itself stands upon the Promontory of a rock 140 feet high, and is, as it were suspended over the river Eden, which with a clear and rapid Current at least 300 feet in width and half a mile in length comes Fore right upon it, and seems to run quite underneath the hill, but immediately shewing it self again, continues its Course, in sight, near a mile below, which together with the Grotesque and uncommon yet beautiful Grounds about it, gives it the appearance of a finish'd landskip made up of all the scenery of nature and capable of furnishing a Composition of Images, for the variety of Picture and Prospect.

Within the compass of one view, it presents you with a collection of all the Great and agreeable Objects of the Contry (*sic*); as Rivers, Woods, Fields, Rocks, Hills and Vallies, besides running springs, and falling waters, which as they are ever in motion, doe very much enliven the prospect, and gratifie at once both the Ear and Eye. Such a Variety and assemblage of Rural beauties in one prospect, and as it were in one Point of view, as is very rare and uncommon, is yet, however, Corby's peculiar distinction and without a Rival.

Another lengthy and full description of Corby was written by Mrs Catherine Howard<sup>15</sup> in 1831. It is included in her *Reminiscences for my Children*. *Inter alia*, she refers to one of the temples seen by Sir John Clerk, and she goes on to say that it was built by Thomas Howard, who spent much of his time in the summer there and a third of his income in decorating the walks. These were graced by a number of sphinxes, sea-horses, gods and goddesses. "Alas! such is the destructive propensity so innate in the English, that, when the pleasure-grounds were open to everyone, they left neither a seat nor the smooth bark of a tree unmutilated with names and low verses; not even a statue or Roman altar escaped from being broken to atoms and thrown into the river . . ." <sup>16</sup> The late Lt-Col H. Levin has told the story how many of these statues met their doom when the successful result of an election was being celebrated, and, as Mrs Howard relates, "Polyphemus alone remains". (Polyphemus was, of course, that giant Cyclops, described in Homer's *Odyssey*, whose single eye was put out by Odysseus with a burning stake as the giant lay in a drunken sleep.)

The colossal statue of Polyphemus, called the Corby Giant in a guide book of 1847, was once in possession of a golden eye, but one morning, when the walks were open daily to the public, the statue was found to be without its head. This had been hurled into the river, the eye having first been removed and stolen by some vandal, but the head was recovered, fastened firmly on to the body again, and another eye of a less valuable material was put in its place.<sup>17</sup>

On page 100 is a photograph of the Corby Giant taken at some time before the 1914 War when he faced along the path. Since then he has been damaged by a falling tree

when he lost an arm,<sup>18</sup> and after about two and a half centuries of an open-air life he is now somewhat weather-beaten, in spite of which it must be admitted that he has achieved the status of a national monument.

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Mr H. W. Hodgson for giving me three most useful references, and also to Mrs H. Hallaway of Cumwhitton and Mrs S. Pirt of Great Corby for finding and obtaining the photograph of Polyphemus.

- <sup>1</sup> Sir John was born 18 February and baptised 26 February 1676. *The Dictionary of National Biography* gives 1684.
- <sup>2</sup> See Iain G. Brown, "Critick in Antiquity . . ." in *Antiquity*, li, (1977).
- <sup>3</sup> "Clerk of Penicuik Memoirs", *Scottish History Society*, xiii, (1892).
- <sup>4</sup> CW2, lxi, (1961) and this volume p. 103.
- <sup>5</sup> CW2, lxv, (1965).
- <sup>6</sup> Burke's *Landed Gentry*, i, 634, (1871).
- <sup>7</sup> "Memoirs" *op. cit.*, 116-117.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 143 and CW2, lxii, 248-249.
- <sup>9</sup> "Memoirs" *op. cit.*, 149.
- <sup>10</sup> CW2, lxii, 257.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.
- <sup>12</sup> *Paradise Lost* (London 1836), 85.
- <sup>13</sup> Gordon Nares, "Corby Castle, Cumberland", *Country Life*, 7 January 1954, 32.
- <sup>14</sup> Scottish Record Office, GD 18/5093.
- <sup>15</sup> Catherine Mary was the 2nd dau. of Sir Richard Neave, Bart, and was the 2nd wife of Henry Howard of Corby Castle, the grandson of Thomas who died in 1740. He had by her two sons and three daughters.
- <sup>16</sup> Mrs Catherine Howard, *Reminiscences for my Children*, 4 vols., 95/96. (Privately printed by Thurnham, Carlisle, 1836).
- <sup>17</sup> *A Guide to Corby and Wetheral*, Carlisle, Whitridge, (1847), 25, 26.
- <sup>18</sup> Letter 2 January 1978, Mrs Helen Hallaway, Low Holm, Cumwhitton.