

Hume letters bought for the nation

A collection of rare letters written more than 250 years ago by the Scottish philosopher David Hume to his “oldest and best friend” has been bought for the nation.

The National Library of Scotland (NLS) paid £102,000 at auction for the six handwritten letters by Hume to his friend William Mure of Caldwell, who was MP for Renfrewshire, Baron of the Scottish Exchequer and Rector of Glasgow University.

The letters, sent by Hume between 1763 and 1770, included updates on the progress of Mure’s sons at school in London and Hume’s own thoughts on education.

Hume also wrote fierce criticism of the boys’ tutor, named Graffigni, branding him in one of the letters “an empty, conceited fellow, full of chimeras and pretensions”.

The philosopher is known to have criticised Graffigni and his methods so much to his face that the teacher eventually left the school.

The rediscovered cache of letters went under the hammer at Bonhams auctioneers in London in November, when it was only known they had been sold to a mystery buyer.

The NLS has now revealed it was able to make the purchase thanks to support from the Soutar Trust and the Friends of the Nations’ Libraries.

Ralph McLean, NLS' Manuscripts Curator, said: "We were delighted to acquire the Hume letters to William Mure – it's vital to keep manuscripts of such significance in public hands.

"These letters complement our archival collections of both Hume and Mure. They are now accessible to the public via our reading rooms.

"We are grateful to both the Soutar Trust and the Friends of the Nations' Libraries who supported the purchase."

Matthew Haley, Managing Director of Bonhams Knightsbridge, said: "Hume took a very keen interest in education and, in particular, the education of his close friend William Mure's sons.

"In these letters Hume reports back about how Mure's sons are doing. He is doing his best to maintain the standards of education and he clearly doesn't approve of the way the boys are being taught.

"He writes a character assassination of the boys' tutor and expresses his own ideas on the teaching of subjects like French and Latin.

"He comes up with ideas like 'the French language is very useful, and if not acquired when young, never is thoroughly learned'."

He added: "We were very excited to handle these letters and I am delighted they have gone to the National Library of Scotland, where they will be accessible to the public."

Hume, originally David Home, was born in 1711 in a tenement on the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh.

He was educated by private tutors until attending Edinburgh University from the age of 11, which nurtured his passion for "the new ideas of science, philosophy and literature".

Hume became one of the most influential thinkers at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment. He has been described as the “most important philosopher ever to have written in English”.

One of Hume’s complaints about Graffigni was his method of teaching Latin.

He writes to lawyer and politician Mure: “I find that your sons are not taught any Latin grammar – they are only instructed in the sense of single detached words... I doubt a dead language can ever be learnt in this manner without grammar.”

Hume referred to Mure after his death as “irreplaceable... the oldest and best friend I had in the world”.

Hume and Mure both died in 1776, and much of their correspondence has been lost.



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