

Major archive spanning 200 years of British history secured for the nation

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Today, a major collection of historic documents – regarded as one of Scotland's 'crown jewels' by record keepers – has been secured for the nation.

Image



Map of the Americas

The Melville papers, containing around 11,000 records that span 150 years of key historical moments in British history, have been acquired by National Records of Scotland (NRS) with the help of major funding from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and the Scottish Government.

The papers, which had previously been on long-term loan to NRS since 1951, range from 1775 to 1830. Key documents in the collection include the private records of Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811), and his son Robert, 2nd Viscount (1771-1851). Both were significant British political figures whose careers influenced the American War of Independence, British rule in India, and in

the administration of the Admiralty and the Royal Navy.

The purchase of the papers was funded by £725,000 from the Scottish Government, and £625,000 from the NHMF.

Colin McLean, on behalf of NHMF, said: “This is wonderful news. As such prominent political figures, the archives of both the 1st and 2nd Viscounts Melville offer a fascinating insight into some of the 18th and 19th centuries’ most monumental moments in our history. Charting the American Revolution and War of Independence and the nation’s struggle against Napoleon, the trustees of National Heritage Memorial Fund felt this archive was of such historical importance it must be safeguarded for future generations.”

Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs, said: “This collection is of enormous importance and value to Scotland. It provides rich detail about the history of our people and our place in the wider world, and gives a fascinating view of Scotland’s government and politics at a critical period in our history. There are very few important politicians and military and naval men of the time who did not have dealings with the Dundases. Their influence over the government, politics and society of Scotland was extensive – and their legacy lives on Scottish public life today, in our street names, in statues and now, in this collection.”

George MacKenzie, Keeper of the Records of Scotland, said: “Today’s announcement secures the long-term future of this incredible collection. Had we not acquired it for Scotland’s archive, the papers would have been sold at auction at a price beyond the public purse and broken up and dispersed across the world. We are enormously grateful that the Melville family offered us the first chance to acquire the collection when they decided to sell it. The Melville papers have been extensively used by the public since they were first loaned to us, and now that they’re in public ownership, we’ll be working hard to make them even more widely available.”

Highlights from the large quantity of Melville papers include:

- A letter of Adam Smith, author of the *Wealth of Nations*, 1779 advocating free trade with Ireland.
- A copy of the journal of Admiral George Cockburn with a full account of Napoleon’s last journey into exile on St Helena, 1815.
- Correspondence and papers concerning Henry Dundas’s government of East India, 1784-1801, including the extraordinary story of his mixed-race niece,

Mary born in 1769.

- Correspondence showing the ways in which the Dundases tried to control the Scottish electoral system, 1775-1830.
- Henry Dundas's view of the significance of his job as 'Manager' of Scotland, and his system for running it.
- The reaction of the Dundases and their allies to the attempts by the Scottish people to reform the political system, including a letter discussing the massacre at Tranent in August 1797.
- The last letter Henry Dundas ever wrote, on the eve of his death, 1811.

Notes to editors

The National Records of Scotland is a Non-Ministerial Department of the Scottish Government which selects, preserves, and makes available the national archives of Scotland, oversees the registration of births, marriages and deaths, and conducts the Scottish Censuses. It is a centre of expertise on record keeping and archives.

Further information

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