

The Journal of Gilbert Orum

27th April 1706.

At last, all being silent, I am able to embark upon my project, which is to compile a 'Journal'. It is required for the days ahead. Who will read it, I cannot tell, it matters not. I light a small stub of a candle, furnish myself with pen and some paper, draw my chair to the table, place my feet upon Mr Santos' comfortable thighs, and the paper upon Giovanni's heaving chest. I begin.

At ten of the morning of Saturday, this seven-and-twentieth day of April 1706, Dr Blair's man-servant, James Menteith, hammered upon the door to our room, demanding my attendance. Supposing that the surgeon required me, as he has done frequently in the past, to make a graphical record of the performance of some bloody surgical manoeuvre; such as the amputation of a limb, or the extraction of a canker, perhaps the removal of a stone from a man's troubled tripes - manoeuvres which I find utterly abominable, but necessary for the contents of my purse; or that he required me for some small commission, to draw and engrave on copper certain botanical items as he showed an interest in; I pulled on my coat, abandoned my family, and hastened into the morning.

Mr Menteith refused to impart to me the nature of this urgent business, contenting himself with an uncouth witticism at the expense of Dr Blair's cook, a lady of some forty years, abandoned by several suitors who preferred a life at sea to a life in her arms; Menteith coarsely suggested by-the-by that my own time to perform ***** upon the cook's **** had arrived *; he leered at me, showing his black and yellow teeth. My concern increased by the instant, since Mr Menteith has a very persuasive tongue. However, on arrival at Dr Blair's house, I was relieved not to be embraced by the cook; but to be commanded to climb into a carriage with Dr Blair, for an expedition in the direction of Broughty Ferry; a place in which I knew there to be no ladies †; I would not be obliged today to commit the sins of Adultery and Fornication. ‡

Not a mile from Dundee, we came across an excited crowd. I was greatly agitated by this circumstance, imagining a road-side battle, for which - alas - the people of this part of the world are famed, more commonly on a Saturday night. Dr Blair did not share with me the reason for our presence here. We climbed down and found, having battled through the throng, the corpse of a vast animal.

I had no idea what it was. I have seen pictures of whales, but it was not one of those monsters. It was like a ship-wreck upon the land, broken, cast ashore by departed waves, great heaps of useless canvas covering snapped masts and an abandoned hull. It was like a carriage that had calamitously fallen from the road, wheels crushed upon the rocks, all movement smashed. My mastery of words is not fit - would that I had had the time to draw it as I first saw it! - I can see it now only as a man fleetingly remembers a dream. It was huge - five or six times the size of a bull, perhaps ten times, it was hard to estimate; its skin grey and scabbed brown like the side of a wild mountain; its head freakish, oppressive, with a face that in death

* We have elided here and hereinafter words of a *prurient* nature such as those which Mr Orum had written here. They are scarcely appropriate for a genteel audience.

† While we concede that this may be true, only a scoundrel would remark upon it.

‡ It is impossible to conceive of any situation in which a man would be *obliged* to commit such a sin against Decency and Marriage. Our Moral Duty was to remove this remark by Mr Orum - but our Editorial Duty compelled us leave it in the public gaze.

was like no other face I have seen, wise, perhaps - or evil; and a nose - or some powerful cankerous growth that emerged from its broad forehead where its nose should be - that lay upon the ground like a small tree. I could think of no name for it. I could not imagine where it had come from. I held my breath and gazed upon it. My eyes tried to remember every detail. It was not possible. The lines of the body carried me beyond understanding. I could not see how the head joined with the body - the back was too long, the head too vast, there was no neck. Even now, as I write, my breath catches with wonder; I shake my head to clear my thoughts. [§]

It was some time before my eyes came back to me; with difficulty, I forced my gaze away and tried to recognise some of the people gathered there. First and foremost among them, as he had to be, was Mr George Yeaman^{**}, exercising his unquestioned authority as magistrate, beating back the surrounding on-lookers with his stick; ably assisted in this exercise by three of his servants. Among those whom he fended off from the immediate adjacency of the corpse was a red-faced, tear-stained young man, evidently in the highest transports of grief, who had to be repelled time and time again as he hurled himself forward time and again at the huge beast. Another man, more disciplined, but in foreign hat, argued loudly with Mr Yeaman; in response to the man's every remark, question, appeal and threat, Mr Yeaman brandished a sheaf of papers: "You have turned the corpse over to the authorities of this town, sir," he lectured sternly, "and can have no more dealings with it!"

My astonishment was now complete; I could not comprehend how such a huge creature as lay in death before us could be the subject of an ordinary business transaction in which Mr Yeaman was interested. My wonder was not lessened when Dr Blair advised his servant Menteith, without troubling himself to include me in the remark, that this dead beast was an 'Elephant'. What was I to think - I had heard of such a beast, but knew not what it looked like. An Elephant, I asked Menteith, here in Dundee? How came it here? What purpose had it in dying here? James Menteith, as might be expected, sneered at me and gave no useful answer: he expected me to believe that Mr Yeaman had expelled it from his bowels.

Immediately upon Blair's arrival, Mr Yeaman approached with a smile upon his face. "So, Dr Blair," says he, "I shall have the pelt and you shall have the meat and bones, eh?" It was clear from his tone that the two gentlemen had some project in mind, that might not be to the benefit of the creature.

My patron shook his right hand on the deal, and indicated the massing crowd with his left: "But how are we to ...?" he asked.

The scene before us did, in truth, seem uncommonly prejudicial to any private business transaction. Six or seven men were already engaged with large knives, axes, oars, plough-blades, spades, or whatever they might have found to hand at the propitious moment, in cutting, hacking and sawing at the flesh of the dead creature; urged on in their endeavours by a collection of their women-folk, who saw, for perhaps the first time in the year, a grand feast lying waiting for them. By way of answer, Mr Yeaman showed that thick skin and character of authority which has always marked him out from the common mass of humanity; he threatened the crowd with summary execution, eviction and loss of livelihood if they continued to

[§] Dr Blair observes, in his famous Essay:

" 'Tis certainly an Animal of considerable Bigness."

^{**} Mr Yeaman was elected as Provost of Dundee in June 1706, a post which he honourably filled until 1708; and again between 1710 and 1712. Between 1710 and 1715, he represented the Perth Burghs at Westminster. All who knew him testified to his great integrity and his paternal concern for his home-town.

carry away any of the parts of the Elephant. On his command, one of Mr Yeaman's servants produced a musket; which he primed with great ostentation, and proceeded to fire into the air, to the mortal injury of a passing gull, and the severe shock of the assembled people. With a last wail the gull plunged like a brilliant from the blue sky, to be set upon by a furious pack of dogs, whose lust for prey had been excited beyond discipline by the smell of the dead Elephant; the crowd retired grumbling to a safe distance and called out insults to Yeaman's men.