THE EARLY YEARS OF SIR ANDREW MITCHELL (1708-1771):
A BIOGRAPHICAL ADDENDUM

Andrew Mitchell's service to diplomacy — as Britain's envoy to Frederick the Great during the critical period of the Seven Years War — has long been recognized; indeed, there exists general agreement among historians that Mitchell was probably the most accomplished 18th-century British representative at the Prussian court. As such, Mitchell exemplifies on an individual level those opportunities for talented Scotsmen inherent in the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 — opportunities which served to give the Union its distinctive identity and appeal. Correspondingly less, however, is known of Mitchell's earlier life: his background, education, experiences — the formative influences contributing to his later successful diplomatic career. Interesting material among Mitchell's remaining papers — the Craigievar manuscripts, formerly at Fintray House, now in the British Library — provides new information on these points, enabling us to clarify the basic details of his life preceding the embassy to Berlin.

A native of Edinburgh, Andrew Mitchell was born on 15 April 1708, the only surviving son of the Reverend William Mitchell, minister of St. Giles, Moderator of the General Assembly and chaplain in ordinary to George I. Entering Edinburgh University in 1723, he took up the study of law and in 1725 was articled to an advocate. Although brief, his stay at the university exposed Mitchell to the intellectual ferment of the Scottish enlightenment which produced such luminaries as Robertson, Hume and Adam Smith. By the early eighteenth century, Scotland enjoyed a growing reputation for progressive thought particularly in the areas of education, literature, moral philosophy, and economics. Mitchell's lifelong interest in these and related issues clearly reflects this background and places him in the mainstream of the Enlightenment tradition — a significant factor in his later affinity with those cosmopolitan, intellectual circles surrounding the Prussian king and hence with Frederick himself.

While still at Edinburgh, Mitchell married his cousin Barbara Mitchell, heiress to the Aberdeenshire state of Thainston. This marriage brought him into close contact with the Forbes family, one of Aberdeenshire's leading families, Barbara Mitchell being related to Sir John Forbes of Monymusk and her niece having married Sir Arthur Forbes of Craigievar. Mitchell's wife died in 1726, soon
after the birth of a daughter who did not survive infancy. Widowed at the age of 18, Mitchell never married again.

Affected deeply by these events, Mitchell left Scotland in 1729 stopping briefly in London before embarking on visits to the United Provinces (which included two semesters at Leyden University) and Germany. By the summer of 1731, he had travelled to Paris where he remained until early 1732 when he proceeded on a leisurely tour through France and Italy. After an extended stay in Rome, Mitchell returned to Paris in September 1734 and London early in the following year. There he resumed his legal studies and in 1736 was admitted a member of the Scottish Faculty of Advocates. Though also called to the English bar two years later, Mitchell at this time devoted himself more to literature, science and philosophy than law. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1736, he became an active figure in London's intellectual circles, his associates including such expatriate Scots as James Thomson, the poet; Andrew Millar, bookseller and publisher; John Gray, military writer and afterwards Rector of Marishall College, Aberdeen, and George Scott, afterwards preceptor to the Prince of Wales.

Mitchell's public career began in 1741, when the Marquis of Tweeddale, on becoming Secretary of State for Scotland, appointed him under secretary. Though his formal duties were light, the office brought him into close contact with many vital aspects of Scottish life, cultural and economic as well as political. Mitchell's functions ceased when Tweeddale resigned in January 1746, though he continued to be involved in Scottish matters through his friendship with Duncan Forbes, the Lord President, who recognized and valued his sensible policy suggestions. A staunch Whig, linked to the powerful Newcastle interest, Mitchell also entered politics in 1747, standing successfully for Aberdeenshire which he represented until 1755 when he was elected to the Elgin burghs — a seat he held for the remainder of his life. The Newcastle influence likewise secured his nomination in 1752 as one of the two delegates sent to Brussels for the purpose of settling Anglo-Dutch-Austrian differences over the Barrier Treaty — Mitchell's baptism in negotiation. However limited in results, these discussions provided Mitchell with valuable diplomatic experience and the opportunity to impress his superiors; hence, when early in 1756 someone was needed for the important embassy at Berlin, Mitchell was duly appointed — residing there until 1764 and again from 1766 until his death in 1771. Integrity, loyalty, devotion to duty — such were the personal
qualities which helped advance Mitchell's early career; combined with a keen, cultured mind, these qualities later also made him the personal friend of Frederick the Great who composed what is perhaps the best tribute to his memory:

His talents and character had wholly gained my esteem and he retained it to the end of his days. It will be difficult for the Court of London to find a successor of such distinguished and recognized merit.  

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NOTES

1. I wish to thank Bishop's University for providing a grant which facilitated the research upon which this paper is based.


4. Aside from the sketch in the D.N.B., the only work even to mention Mitchell's early years, and then only very briefly, is the London dissertation by P.F. Doran, 'Andrew Mitchell and Anglo Prussian Diplomatic Relations during the Seven Years War.' (London, PH.D, 1972). This thesis was recently published by Garland Press in their dissertation series but, unfortunately, in unrevised form -- without incorporating recent scholarship in the field which has seriously affected its usefulness and reliability as a scholarly contribution. Portions of Mitchell's letters and dispatches have been edited with uneven accuracy by A. Bissett, Memoirs and Papers of Sir Andrew Mitchell (London, 1850) 2 vols.

5. I wish to acknowledge the kindness of the late Lady Sempill who allowed me to consult the Craigievar Papers before their transfer to the British Library (now BL Add.Mss. 58283-58367) and the
6. 'Memorandum regarding Sir Andrew Mitchell's parentage and career', 1773. Craigievar MSS; now B.L. Add. MSS 58327.


9. 'Mitchell's Grand Tour Journals, France and Italy, 1730-35' B.L. Add. MSS. 58314-58320.

10. The Faculty of Advocates in Scotland 1532-1943, Francis Grant ed. (Edinburgh, 1944), 151.


15. See the letters from Sir Arthur Forbes to A. Mitchell, 1745-1755, Craigievar MSS.


17. Letters and papers sent to the Duke of Newcastle and others from the British Commissioners, 1752-1754, Craigievar MSS.

18. Instructions, April 12, 1756. B.L. Add. MSS. 6862. ff 1–5.