

Chalmers J (2005). Sir George Chalmers, (c 1720-1791), portraitist of James Lind.



© John Chalmers, 15 Eden Lane, Edinburgh EH10 4SD. Email: jchal99503@aol.com

George Chalmers was born in Edinburgh about 1720. His grandfather, Charles Chalmers, was killed at the battle of Sherriffmuir in 1715, fighting on the side of the Pretender, and his father, Roderick, who died in 1746, was Ross Herald to the Lyon Court and a heraldic painter. George studied painting under his father and Alan Ramsay. His earliest works, in 1738 and 1739, were portraits engraved by himself. In 1751 he went to Rome, where he mixed with the expatriate Jacobites, and he went on from there to Florence and Minorca, where he painted the governor general, Baron William Blakeney. A mezzotint of this painting is in the National Portrait Gallery.

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About 1760 George returned to Edinburgh, where he assumed the baronetcy in 1764. The baronetcy had been awarded to James Chalmers, Laird of Cults, by Charles II in 1664, no doubt because of his Royalist support. Sir George Chalmers became the 4th holder of the title in 1764, on the death of a relative of the same name. I was unable to find the relationship of the two Georges, but Sir George's father (Roderick) did not hold the title. After Sir George, a cousin, Robert Chalmers, held the title. He, too, was also a painter, who exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1790 to 1799. On Robert's death in 1807 the title passed to his son, Charles William Chalmers, and the baronetcy ceased on his death in 1834 (Cokayne expressed considerable doubt as to the propriety of the title passing to non-linear descendents.)

In June 1768, Sir George married Isabella, daughter of the painter John Alexander and sister of his painter friend Cosmo John Alexander (1724-1772), whom George had met in Italy. Sir George and Isabella had one child, also named Isabella, who became a nun. In 1778 they moved from Edinburgh to Hull and from there, in 1784, to London, where Sir George died in 1791. His estate amounted to £224, which was willed to his daughter.

While in Italy, Sir George copied some of the great masters, including Caravaggio. One commentator said that 'Pompeio and others, the first painters here, say that Mr Chalmers' Leda will not only [bring] honour to himself but to Rome'. Subsequent critics, however, have not treated him so kindly. One wrote he 'drew indifferently and coloured worse'; another described his work with faint praise – it was '...fair if not searching in character, and painted in an easy though somewhat thin manner'. He receives scant mention in the histories of Scottish art (in contrast to his unrelated namesake George Paul Chalmers), and he is not even mentioned in Grove's *History of Art*.

It took some time before Sir George became established as a portraitist. A letter written in 1774 to his friend and fellow Scot, Sir William Chambers, the architect of Somerset House, described his financial plight and sought advice on how best to sell the large collection of pictures which he had inherited from his brother-in-law, Cosmo Alexander, which included a Veronese *Our Savior in the Pharisee's House*. Eventually Sir George became established, however, and he exhibited 24 works at the Royal Academy between 1775 and 1790. One of these was a Magdalen, of which it was said 'It does not possess one principle of beauty'.

The [Lind portrait](#) was not one of those shown at the Royal Academy. It was painted in 1783, during a visit made by Sir George to Portsmouth to paint portraits of naval officers. Two copies exist, one a stipple engraving by I Wright (in the Wellcome Library and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery); the other a pen drawing (probably from Wright's engraving), by AEA Hudson (at the National Library of Medicine, Neg 52). A bronze plaque bearing an image of Lind based on Sir George's portrait is mounted on the wall of the Old Medical School in Edinburgh having been placed there by the Sunkist Growers of Citrus Fruit in California and Arizona 22.5.1953.

Sir George's best known painting is *The Captain of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers William St Clair of Roslin* (1771), which now hangs in the hall of the Royal Company of Archers in Edinburgh. Other works are in the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery of Scotland, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, the City of Edinburgh Collection, and at Drum Castle and Fyvie Castle (National Trust of Scotland). [I have seen photographs and engravings of thirty of his paintings in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery and thought that the criticisms of his work were unduly harsh; many of them to my untutored eye seemed excellent.]

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A footnote: Sir George owned a self-portrait of George Jamesone, with his wife and child, which was painted about 1635. Jamesone was grandfather of Sir George's father-in-law, John Alexander. The painting passed from Sir George to Isabella's second cousin, John Gregory, Professor of Medicine in Edinburgh University (a copy of whose portrait, painted by Sir George, is in the National Portrait Gallery). From John Gregory it went to a cousin, a Mrs Leith, who lived in Canaan Lodge, Edinburgh, which became the home of James Gregory, who succeeded his brother as Professor of Medicine (the Gregory family produced 19 professors in 5 generations). From Canaan Lodge the painting was acquired by Lord Leith, Laird of Fyvie Castle, and a great, great grandson of John Gregory. My reason for including this trivial note is that Canaan Lodge used to stand just the other side of my garden wall! The painting remains in Fyvie Castle (NTS).

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