

Boswell's Ebony Cabinet

MAY I INTRODUCE YOU to Boswell's famous Ebony Cabinet – by way of four dramatic scenes and a great many dates.

The Cabinet was a wedding present, given to Veronica van Sommelsdyck, the Dutch heiress, by her parents when she married Alexander Bruce in 1659. (Boswell's claim that the blood of Robert Bruce flowed in his veins came through Alexander.)

The Cabinet is made of oak, covered with a veneer of ebony, which probably came from Suriname, where the van Sommelsdycks had large holdings. Veronica's father had been Governor there.

The Cabinet descended to Veronica's third daughter, Elizabeth Bruce, who married James Boswell, the seventh laird of Auchinleck. Earlier lairds had been warriors but this James was the first laird of Auchinleck to attend a university – Glasgow. Later he studied law at Leyden, returned to Edinburgh, and became a prominent and prosperous lawyer. He brought the Auchinleck estate out of debt. Lady Betty, who outlived her husband, bequeathed the Cabinet to their eldest son, Alexander, (who was Boswell's father). In 1745 Alexander was made a lord of the Court of Sessions, and in 1756 made also a lord of the Justiciary. He took the (non-inheritable title) of Lord Auchinleck.

Thus, the Ebony Cabinet came to the present Auchinleck House in 1762 when Lord Auchinleck and his family began to live there.

IT WAS in front of this Cabinet – in November 1773, at the end of Boswell's and Johnson's tour of the Hebrides, that the *collision* took place – between Boswell's father (proud, Scot, strict Presbyterian, stern judge) and Dr. Johnson (anti-Scot, anti-Whig, anti-Presbyterian). The Cabinet now held Boswell family treasures and Lord Auchinleck's collection of coins and medals. Oliver Cromwell's coin unfortunately introduced the subject of Charles I and Toryism.

As Boswell reported in his *Life of Johnson*, these two men whom he revered became exceedingly warm and violent. He durst not interfere in their altercation – but was distressed to see his honored father and respected friend fighting like gladiators. Surprisingly for Boswell, he refused to record the scene, though he knew this would disappoint his readers.

ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-TWO years later – a second dramatic scene was to take place in front of the Cabinet. This was now 1925 – and Boswell's Cabinet was no longer in Scotland. It was in Ireland – at Malahide Castle, owned by the last direct male descendant of the biographer, James Boswell, the sixth Lord Talbot de Malahide. His mother, Emily Boswell, the biographer's great-granddaughter, had married the fifth Lord Talbot de Malahide. Auchinleck continued to be inhabited by Emily's elder sister, Julia Boswell Mounsey. There were no children from this marriage and when Julia died, her brother-in-law, the fifth Lord Talbot, representing his son, James Talbot de Malahide, took over Auchinleck. He and his family lived at Auchinleck during the shooting season but Malahide Castle continued to be the Talbot residence.

Before the Great War, the fifth Lord Talbot, again acting on his son's behalf, shipped from Auchinleck to Malahide, furniture, chattels, the library books, the Ebony Cabinet, and Boswell's papers which he had bought from the estate of Julia Boswell Mounsey. In 1920, not long before his death, the fifth Lord Talbot sold Auchinleck House and the 900 remaining acres to a distant kinsman.

THE SECOND DRAMATIC SCENE, which took place in Ireland, at Malahide, in the summer of 1925, was the following. The fifth Lord Talbot's son, James Boswell had become the sixth Lord Talbot, and had recently married Joyce Gunning Kerr of the famous acting family. At the request of the American Consul in Dublin, the Talbots agreed to have Professor Chauncey Brewster Tinker for tea. Professor Tinker's volume of Boswell's letters had been published in 1924 and now he had evidence that there were Boswell papers at Malahide. Conversation at tea was not easy or agreeable, but finally Lord Talbot's bride led Professor Tinker to the Cabinet, which was now filled to overflowing with

Boswell's *journals*. These were the papers the Talbots thought the most valuable. The Professor looked into the compartments crammed with papers in the wildest confusion. He felt like Sinbad in the Valley of Rubies. "I glanced, panting the while. I realized a new day had dawned for Boswellians and that for CB Tinker there was a dreadful crisis. I did not sleep that night." He was right to be fearful. The Talbots had no interest in allowing Professor Tinker access to Boswell's valuable letters. Back in America, news that Boswell papers existed spread quickly. Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach, the great Philadelphia bookman, cabled "£50,000 for the contents of the Cabinet – sight unseen." Lady Talbot cabled back that there was nothing at Malahide for sale, and Lord Talbot was greatly annoyed to be approached in this manner. Material from the Cabinet was now put in their bank for safety.

THE THIRD DRAMATIC SCENE took place on the 15th June 1926. Dashing Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham came to tea at Malahide. He had an impeccable introduction from a close friend of the Talbots, and his ease, good manners, and charm made it a delightful party. He showed no interest in Boswell's papers – but kept the conversation to Irish wolfhounds and horse racing (Lord Talbot's interests, he'd been told). Lady Talbot was finally able to coax him to the Cabinet – and his hand fell on a Goldsmith letter. He looked at it, held it to his breast and declared it "the finest Goldsmith letter I've ever seen." This was the beginning of Colonel Isham's maneuvering with diplomacy and daring.

Next year, in August 1927, Colonel Isham and Lord Talbot signed a contract for all Boswell's letters and miscellaneous papers – and not long after this, a contract for all of his journals. By 1928, Colonel Isham's first volume of a magnificent eighteen-volume edition of Malahide Papers was published. He had found something equal to his powers – to purchase and publish the papers – to give Boswell to the world! For this heroic story and its near disaster, Kenneth Auchincloss is the authority.

In 1948 the sixth Lord Talbot died, the last direct male descendent of the biographer. He was succeeded by Milo Talbot, son of the fifth Lord Talbot's brother, no relation to Boswell, the biographer. Milo was a Shrewsbury Talbot; a diplomat and a charming friend. He died unmar-



*Lady Eccles at the Four Oaks Farm
bon voyage party*



*Marjorie Wynne at Boswell's Ebony Cabinet
bon voyage party*

ried, on 16 April 1973 – unexpectedly on an Aegean cruise. His only close relation was his sister, Rose Talbot. Milo's estate took several years to settle and during that time Rose Talbot emigrated to another "Malahide," where she still lives on a fine family property in Tasmania, established in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1976, an auction of all the contents of Malahide Castle was scheduled to take place. I told Yale I would not bid on the Cabinet – if they wanted to do so. I was told by Fritz Liebert, in no uncertain terms, that Yale was *not* going to bid on any item in the sale. So – I placed my bid – and was successful. The under bidder was a Dublin furniture dealer.

Months and months later, the Cabinet arrived at Four Oaks Farm – in a huge van. Two men staggered in with the top section, two others supported the structure of the legs – and a fifth man carried a bag of ebony bits, which had fallen off. Boswell's Cabinet had *never* been in a steam-heated house – and soon more ebony began to pop off. We asked Charles van Ravenswaay, then director of Winterthur, to come to lunch and he brought Mr. Martin, the Winterthur cabinetmaker, with him. The Cabinet was taken to Winterthur for a six-month climatization, restoration, and rest. It returned, refreshed, to its American home and has settled in, happily surrounded by a few familiar eighteenth-century