

This large and impressive landscape painted by George Barret in about 1770 shows the presbytery and flanking transepts of the great monastery of Montrose Abbey in the Scottish borders. The picture is associated with a commission from the Duke of Buccleuch, one of Barret's most important patrons in his early years in England, which resulted in what Ellis Waterhouse judged 'his most memorable surviving works'. Landscapes of this ambition, painted for the leading aristocrats of the day, help explain one of the most noteworthy aspects of George Barret's career - his meteoric ascent within half a dozen years of his move from Dublin to an acknowledged position as one of the leading artists in London. In this short time the young artist from Dublin's Liberties had made a sufficient name for himself to ensure selection as one of the foundation members of the Royal Academy, despite the fact that landscape painting was regarded as a notably lesser speciality within the academic hierarchy. In addition to his prodigious talents, one of the factors which without doubt helped in this rise to eminence was Barret's ability to cultivate patrons. As a very young artist he had won the prestigious commission to decorate the Library at Russborough, County Wicklow, for Joseph Leeson, later 1st Earl of Milltown. He also won patronage from Lord Powerscourt, the Conollys of Castletown and the Taylours of Headfort. Social skills as much as artistic prowess were essential to a successful career (as Joshua Reynolds found to his great advantage and James Barry to his cost) and it seems clear that Barret was able to mix easily with his aristocratic clients. The artist appears in a letter of 7 December 1762 from Emily FitzGerald writing from her sister's house at Castletown in which she notes Barret's presence in the company of Lord Powerscourt and, in addition to the view he was commissioned to paint of the house, he helped Emily's niece, Harriet Conolly with her drawing.

Barret moved to London sometime after February 1763 and his success was almost immediate with a Dublin newspaper reporting in April the following year that 'Mr. Barret's Landscape, which obtained the 50 pounds premium from the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, is purchased by the Marquis of Rockingham, for 100 guineas'. Rockingham would continue to be an important client, for whom Barret painted views for his Irish seat at Coolattin, County Wicklow. It is likely that in these early years in London, Barret was tapping into Whig networks of patronage centered on his friend and compatriot Edmund Burke who would become Rockingham's secretary in 1765. He also painted twelve views of Welbeck in Nottinghamshire for the Duke of Portland (another Whig grandee and friend of Burke). Yet another of Barret's early clients was William Scott, the young 3rd Duke of Buccleuch, and, in, or about, 1769 he visited the duke's estate of Dalkeith Palace near Edinburgh, en route sketching at Melrose Abbey. The fruits of this trip were exhibited at the Royal Academy in the inaugural exhibition in 1769 and the two following years and included Part of Melrose Abbey by Moonlight and A View of the Duke of Buccleugh's Park at Dalkeith with part of one of the wings of Dalkeith House. Barret was lucky in his patron. The third duke (1746-1812) was an urbane and sophisticated collector with marked literary tastes and a man of sensibility as revealed by Thomas Gainsborough's sympathetic portrait of him cuddling a terrier in a portrait of almost exactly the same date as Barret's view. His name, according to his friend Sir Walter Scott 'was never mentioned without praises by the rich and benefactions by the poor'.

The present work showing Melrose Abbey is closely comparable to another version of the painting still in the Duke of Buccleuch's collection at Bowhill (fig. 1), the main difference being the charming vignette of a family picnic at bottom left. This figure group shows Barret at his most confident and dashing. A young boy carrying a fishing rod over his shoulder is showing off a fish he has just caught in the nearby River Tweed to the seated man with his back to the viewer. The facial expressions of the boy and the seated woman are caught with masterly economy. Behind, a rather Irish looking cottage, or cabin, contrasts in its modest vernacular architecture with the glories of the Gothic ruins. In the Bowhill picture this figure group is replaced with a somewhat mournful mother whose

attention a child is trying at attract. There are numerous other differences in the disposition of the foreground and in the present work two additional figures are introduced at the foot of the Gothic tracery window. Barret also painted a charming gouache of the abbey seen from a distance showing its setting in a bend of the Tweed (fig 2).



fig 1.

George Barret (1732-1784) A View of Melrose Abbey. c. 1770

In the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensbury KT

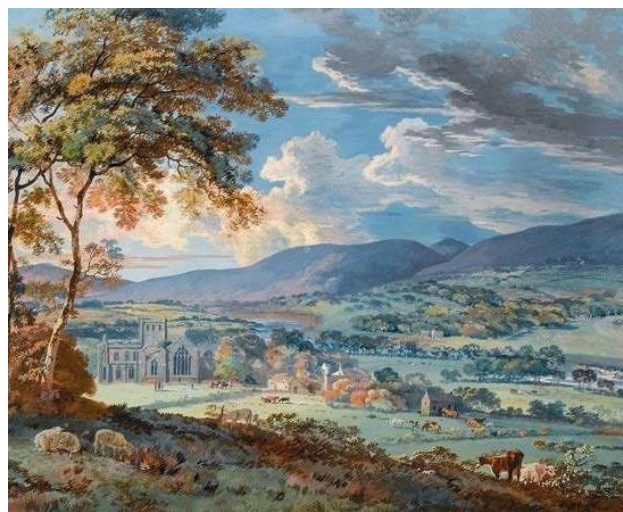


fig 2.

George Barret (1732-1784) A Distant View of Melrose Abbey. Private collection. c. 1770

Melrose Abbey in Roxburghshire was founded in 1136 by Cistercian monks from Rievaulx in Yorkshire under the patronage of King David I. On the main route to Edinburgh from the south, it was destroyed by the English on several occasions. The abbey was the burial place of many of the kings of Scotland and in 1996 Robert the Bruce's heart which had been buried in the church was unearthed, preserved in a conical lead container, and subsequently reinterred under a memorial stone. The abbey was long under the protection of the Dukes of Buccleuch, hence the attraction of it as a subject for Barret's commission. In 1822, the then Duke paid for extensive restoration of the

ruins under the supervision of Sir Walter Scott. The abbey features in many of Scott's works, notably *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805): 'if thou would'st view fair Melrose alright, Go visit it by the pale moonlight...'. It is an intriguing possibility that Scott was here inspired by Barret's view of the abbey by moonlight which he had exhibited at the Royal Academy. In 1918, the 7th Duke of Buccleuch gave the ruins of the abbey to the nation.

Barret is not often thought of as a painter of architecture, though he portrayed a wide variety of buildings, from the late antique *Tempietto* at Clitumno (painted after an engraving by Piranesi) to the Georgian mansion of Castletown, County Kildare (both private collections). The closest parallel to the Montrose painting is a very fine view of the ecclesiastical site at Ballygarth, County Meath. This was painted before he left Ireland for the Pepper family who, like the Buccleuchs at Montrose, had close connections with the church depicted. Also before leaving Ireland, Barret had honed his skills as an architectural draughtsman working for the antiquarian Gabriel Beranger.

The ruins of Melrose Abbey was a favourite subject for Romantic artists of a later generation than Barret, notably Turner and Thomas Girtin, who often exaggerated its scale for dramatic effect. Barret by contrast rather minimises the architecture within the picture, making it just one feature, if a prominent one, of an appealing landscape composition. Most artists selected the south elevation to portray, but the same view that Barret selected was drawn by Robert Billings in 1832, after the restoration by Scott (fig 3).

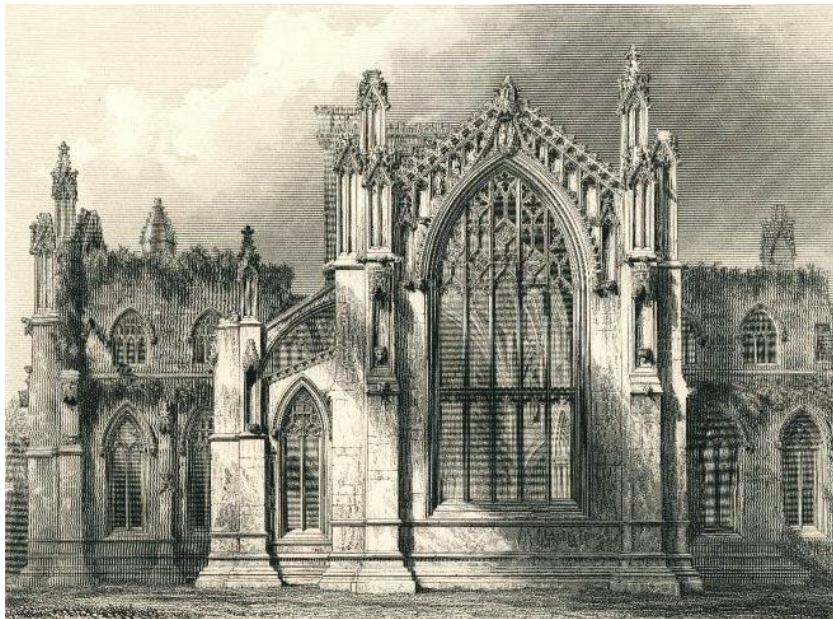


fig 3.

Robert Billings. *The East Side of the Ruins of Melrose Abbey*, 1832

It would seem that Barret was particularly pleased with this work as, most unusually, he signed it. The gravestone on the foreground is inscribed with fictive lettering and beneath this Barret has added his signature. It is unclear if the placing of the signature had significance for the artist. His contemporary John Butts devised a memento mori signature on a tombstone on the reverse of his well-known *Et in Arcadia Ego* (c. 1760, private collection). Later, William Sadler signed a Dutch-inspired view of a church on a flagstone (1812, private collection). The linkage here is less contrived, but nevertheless the placing of the signature next to the tomb, evoking the artist's own mortality, is

in keeping with the reflections on transience which monastic ruins so readily provoke. This elegiac meditation on the cycles of history - of change and decay - is, however, firmly pushed into the background, and foregrounded instead, in the beautifully painted family group, is the cheerful enjoyment of the quotidian with Barret effortlessly combining the great themes of art - memory, the numinous and, in Melrose's glorious architecture, the creative spirit - with the simple pleasure of catching a fish.

William Laffan, March 2020

We are grateful to Logan Morse who will be including this painting in the PhD thesis on George Barret that she is currently researching.