

'The Advantage in Buying Modern Pictures': Letters from the Scottish Colourist F. C. B. Cadell to his Patron Ion Harrison

Kirstie Meehan and Alice Strang

This paper discusses the recent gift by the Harrison Family to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art of archival material relating to the Scottish Colourist F. C. B. Cadell and the Glasgow ship-owner Ion Harrison. Consisting of 66 letters between the artist and his patron, the correspondence tracks their developing relationship from 1928 until Cadell's death in 1937. The Gallery's Archivist, Kirstie Meehan, outlines the content of the letters and their acquisition and exhibition, and Alice Strang, curator of the Gallery's recent Cadell retrospective exhibition, discusses personal and professional issues contained within the material, from first acquisitions to the provision of whisky on the artist's deathbed.

On 1 December 1929, the Scottish Colourist F. C. B. Cadell (1883–1937) wrote to his patron, the Glasgow ship-owner Major Ion Harrison (1889–1952), explaining:

The advantage in buying modern pictures is 1. That the buyer knows the work to be by the artist and who painted it, 2. Buying comparatively low with the sporting chance, confident with either knowledge or luck, that the picture will go up + 3. The advantage, + this to the painter, of encouraging Contemporary art without which there would be no future 'old masters'!¹

Between their introduction in 1928 and the artist's death in 1937, a close friendship developed between Cadell and Harrison, who became one of Cadell's most important patrons. Their relationship is revealed in the 66 letters from painter to collector that were recently given to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) Archive by the Harrison Family, which are now available for consultation by researchers.² Selected letters were included in dedicated archival displays as part of the Gallery's 2011 and 2012 touring exhibitions of the work of Cadell and S. J. Peploe (1871–1935), which

¹ Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archive (SNGMA), GMA A118/6, Letter from F. C. B. Cadell to Ion Harrison dated 1 December 1929. The idiosyncrasies of Cadell's spelling, punctuation and so on have been maintained in quotations.

² The gift was announced in 'Darkness falls on a Colourist: letters reveal the agonies of Francis Cadell', *The Times*, 2 February 2015, 14–15.

along with one dedicated to J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961) in 2013, made up the SNGMA's acclaimed 'Scottish Colourist Series'.³ Along with G. L. Hunter (1877–1931), these four artists all spent extended amounts of time in France, had an early understanding of developments in French painting from Manet to the Impressionists, Cézanne, Matisse and the Fauves, and a love of brilliant colour. However, they never formed an official association with each other and only exhibited together on three occasions during their lifetimes.⁴

The letters donated by the Harrison family shed an intimate light on the career and personal life of Cadell, and the Scottish art world of the late 1920s and 1930s. 'Bunty', as he was affectionately known, was born in Edinburgh in 1883 to a comfortably middle-class family: the eldest of three children, his father was a well-respected surgeon, and Cadell was educated at Edinburgh Academy. At the age of sixteen he moved to Paris with his mother and sister (the actress Jean Cadell, who would later appear in *Whisky Galore!*), and studied painting at the Académie Julian. After several years spent between the French and Scottish capitals, as well as in Munich, Cadell settled in Edinburgh in 1908. The only one of the Scottish Colourists to see active service in the First World War, Cadell joined the 9th Battalion, the Royal Scots, as a Private in 1915, eventually being commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 5th Battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Following demobilisation, Cadell moved to Ainslie Place in the city's New Town and formed a close friendship with Peploe. In addition to the interiors, portraits and still lives for which he is celebrated, Cadell frequently travelled to Iona, often with Peploe, where he painted the natural beauty of the Hebridean island. By the late 1920s Cadell was struggling to sell his works, a combined result of a weakened art market and his extravagant lifestyle, becoming reliant on the support of patrons such as Ion Harrison and the ship-owner George W. Service (1864–1940). Cadell spent his later years in poor health before succumbing to cancer in 1937.

A significant proportion of the role of Alice Strang, a Senior Curator at the SNGMA and curator of the 'Scottish Colourist Series' of exhibitions, involved tracking down paintings and archive material held in private collections, with the aim of both sourcing loans for display and conducting research. The Harrison family were already supporters of the National Galleries of Scotland, and were among the first people whom Alice contacted when beginning her research. Members of the family arrived at the SNGMA one day, unexpectedly bearing a small cardboard box of correspondence between Cadell and Ion Harrison, much to our delight. Initially placed on loan for the duration of

³ 'F. C. B. Cadell', 22 October 2011–18 March 2012, 'S. J. Peploe', 3 November 2012–23 June 2013 and 'J. D. Fergusson', 7 December 2013–15 June 2014, all at SNGMA with tours of selected works to The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum, Aberdeen Art Gallery and Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, respectively.

⁴ The term 'Scottish Colourist' was not applied to them exclusively until 1948, when all but Fergusson had died, in an exhibition held at T. & R. Annan & Sons Ltd, Glasgow, November 1948.

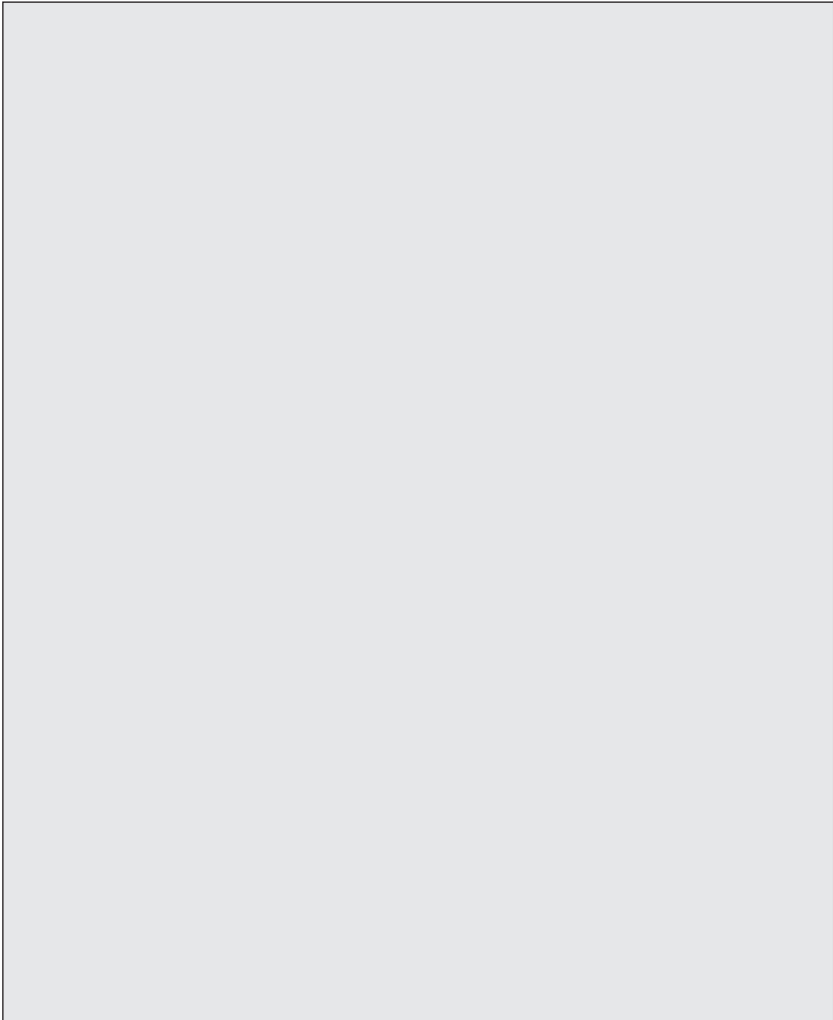


Plate 1 Letter from F. C. B. Cadell to Ion Harrison dated 1 December 1929, GMA A118/6, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. © National Galleries of Scotland. Photography by John McKenzie.

the Cadell exhibition, the terms of the loan were extended so that some of the material could also be displayed in the Peplow retrospective. Following the conclusion of both projects, the Harrisons generously decided to donate the letters to the SNGMA Archive.

The Harrison collection comprises 66 letters (Plate 1) written by Cadell to Ion Harrison, spanning the period 1928 to 1937, the year of Cadell's death. In addition, a further four letters from other correspondents to Ion Harrison are included, mostly regarding the circumstances of Cadell's death and the winding up of his estate.⁵ The material provides a fascinating and intimate insight into the peaks and troughs of Cadell's professional and personal life, and illuminates the relationship between artist and patron. Handwritten and enclosed in the original envelopes (which often provide details of the date of writing and the place of despatch), the letters were in excellent condition when they came to the SNGMA on loan. Stored in a small cardboard box and bundled together with pink string, they had suffered no adverse effects from being in private hands for 80 years.

A listing of the material – detailing the correspondents, dates, number of pages in each envelope and so on – was made immediately upon physical receipt at the SNGMA, partly in the interest of making the content available for Alice and other staff members to consult as soon as possible. The letters aided staff in researching the exhibition and preparing wall texts and labels to accompany the artworks, in addition to providing quotations used by Alice in the accompanying exhibition catalogue and for use in lectures.⁶ The correspondence selected for inclusion in the Cadell exhibition was examined by our Conservation team to assess its suitability for display. After the status of the archive changed from a loan to a donation the letters were numbered, catalogued in greater detail, transcribed and transferred to archive-quality enclosures in accordance with professional best practice, making them available for consultation by researchers and for loan to other institutions.

For all three Colourist exhibitions, a room was dedicated specifically to displaying archive material, with the intention of providing biographical context to the paintings on display. Curated by Archivist Kirstie Meehan, these free displays – shown in the Keiller Library, downstairs from the paying exhibition – included correspondence, sketchbooks and artists' equipment, such as Cadell's paintbrushes, tubes of paint and portable easels (Plate 2). Additional archive material was interspersed in display cases in the upstairs exhibition, but the contents of the Keiller Library display were intended to provide a self-contained, intimate and personal impression of both Cadell and the era in which he worked.

For the 2011–12 Cadell exhibition, seven letters were selected from the tranche of material on loan from the Harrison family, with the intention of shedding light on different points in his life. The earliest letter displayed, from

⁵ The other correspondents are Arthur Hedderwick, G. W. Service and Jean Cadell.

⁶ Alice Strang, *The Scottish Colourist Series: F. C. B. Cadell* (Edinburgh, 2010).

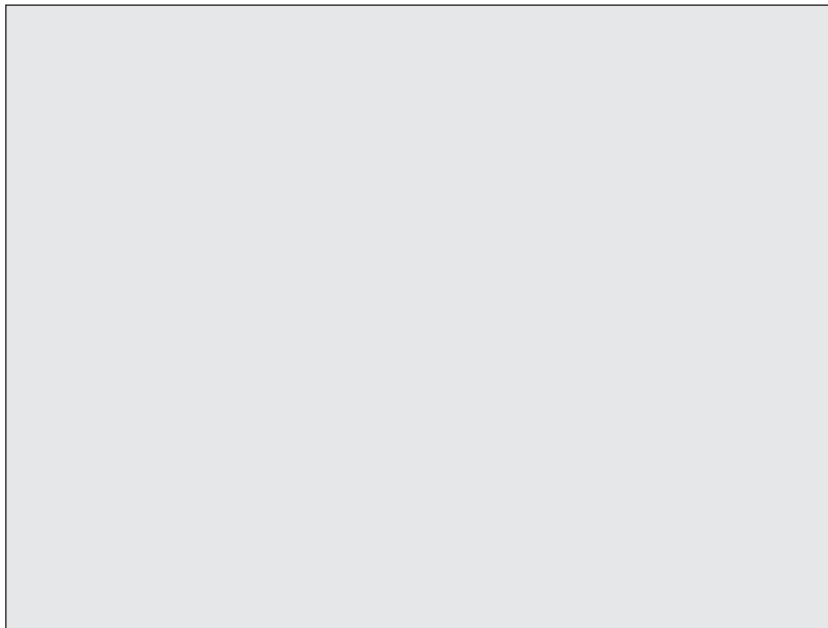


Plate 2 The Keiller Library at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, during the exhibition 'The Scottish Colourist Series: F. C. B. Cadell' (2011–12). © National Galleries of Scotland. Photography by John McKenzie.

1933, refers to the artist's involvement with the Society of Eight, an Edinburgh-based exhibiting society of only eight members, of which Cadell was co-founder in 1912.⁷ Other letters shown described his time painting on Iona, and the preponderance of other artists who had had the same idea ('As they say, "there's an awful artists" here just now. [John] Duncan, [William] Stewart Orr, [Hamilton] Glass, [James Elliott] Shearer, [S. J.] Peplow and myself ...').⁸ A recurring theme is the difficulty of selling paintings in the challenging art market of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In one of these letters, Cadell advises Harrison to invest in Peplow's work:

If your son ever has to raise the wind, which I hope will not be the case, he will find your Peplows *most* useful, a splendid investment. If I were a rich man I'd buy a lot of them even if I couldn't hang them all.⁹

⁷ SNGMA, GMA A118/43, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 16 December 1933.

⁸ SNGMA, GMA A118/10, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 3 September 1931.

⁹ SNGMA, GMA A118/6, Letter from Cadell to Harrison dated 1 December 1929.

The last two letters featured in the exhibition concerned Cadell's final years of poor health, leading to his eventual death in Edinburgh on 6 December 1937. In them, Cadell writes frankly but uncomplainingly of his discomfort, while staying in the Officers' Association nursing home in Belgrave Crescent. The inclusion of these letters in the exhibition allows us to read how Cadell describes his life and career in his own words, giving visitors an impression of both the man and the relationships he built up over the course of a lifetime.

Additional material from the Harrison collection was exhibited in the 2012–13 retrospective of the work of S. J. Peplow. Cadell and Peplow's friendship – and frequently Peplow's comparative financial success – is described in a series of letters to Harrison, but it is perhaps those in which Cadell describes Peplow's ill health and decline in his later years which are most poignant: 'I saw Peplow the other day. He has been *very* ill and is like a skeleton. My fingers met round his biceps.'¹⁰ The final letter displayed in the Peplow exhibition was written on black-edged paper by Henry Hastings, Secretary of the Royal Scottish Academy, informing Cadell of Peplow's death and the arrangements for his funeral.¹¹

We were fortunate to have a dedicated space within each of the Scottish Colourist exhibitions in which to show archive material in ideal conditions: the Keiller Library was purposefully designed for the display of archive and special collections material with temperature and humidity control, and low lux levels employed to protect fragile material from the destructive effects of light. However, we faced some difficulties: due to the requirement to keep temperature and humidity at unwavering levels in the space, the Library's doors must remain closed. This proved off-putting to some visitors, who would walk past without entering (perhaps presuming it to be a study or research area rather than exhibition space). Despite the Keiller Library being designed to show archive material, the permanent display cases lining the room's walls (see Plate 2) are not large, therefore providing little flexibility for the presentation of a range of archive material varying in both format and size.

Additionally, the Keiller Library is situated on the floor beneath the paying exhibition, so it proved difficult – particularly in a building designed as an orphanage rather than as an art gallery, with its narrow corridors intended for channelling children instead of encouraging art enthusiasts to meander – to direct visitors towards the space. We were therefore reliant on signage rather than the natural flow of the building for orientation.

Despite the physical challenges that we faced in exhibiting material the public responded incredibly positively to these archival displays, and after the Cadell exhibition it was determined to repeat the format for the subsequent

¹⁰ SNGMA, GMA A118/50, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 24 November 1934.

¹¹ SNGMA, GMA A118/53, Letter from Henry Hastings of the Royal Scottish Academy to F. C. B. Cadell and thence to Ion Harrison, 14 October 1934.

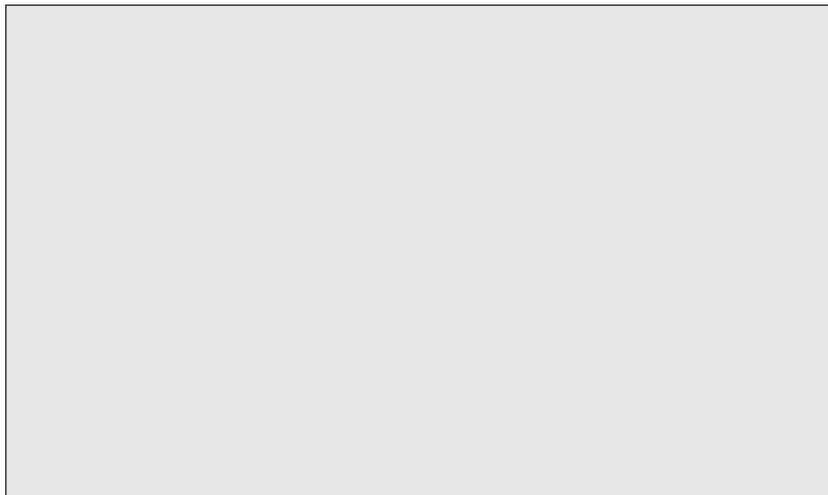


Plate 3 F. C. B. Cadell with Ronald, Iain, Marie-Louise and Ion Harrison at Tantallon Castle, near North Berwick, 1936. Private collection. © National Galleries of Scotland. Photography by John McKenzie.

Peploe and 2013–14 Fergusson retrospectives.¹² It also became apparent that the prominent inclusion of such a comprehensive selection of letters, photographs, sketchbooks and equipment in the first of the Scottish Colourist retrospectives, lent from various sources, encouraged other families and private collectors to come forward with archive material relating to Peploe and Fergusson, creating in-depth and fascinating displays in the subsequent exhibitions of 2012 and 2013.

As for the story revealed in the Harrison gift, it begins with Ion Harrison's acquisition of his first painting by Cadell, through the Glasgow-based dealer Alexander Reid (1854–1928) in about 1925.¹³ The patron and painter met three years later and Harrison and his wife Marie-Louise (née Canonico, 1899–1977) provided vital financial and moral support to Cadell during the final decade of his life (Plate 3). When Cadell visited their home in Helensburgh for the first time, he saw his *Pink Azaleas* of c.1924 hanging on a wall, at which he exclaimed, 'I have often wondered where that picture went. I congratulate you

¹² The Fergusson retrospective did not contain any material from the Harrison gift, as he and Cadell were not close.

¹³ Strang, *F. C. B. Cadell*, 67.

on having acquired it and although I say it myself you have a damned good Cadell.¹⁴

A feature of Cadell's professional life was his independent selling of work. The earliest letters he wrote to Harrison discuss the availability of 'Jack and Tommy' drawings, made in 1915 while training in the 9th Battalion, The Royal Scots. They capture aspects of army and navy life with humour and irony, and a selection were published in a book of the same title in 1916.¹⁵ On 3 May 1928, Cadell explained, 'The price of these drawings is £10 each, but should this be more than you care to give, I have a very considerable number of others which do not appear in the book ... + These are £5 each.'¹⁶ By 9 October 1929, three drawings had been acquired at the reduced price of £4 each: 'Herewith my "Jack and Tommy" original drawings as negotiated – No. 5. The Friend., No. 11. The Joke., No. 15. The Biplane. Total. £12.'¹⁷

As the Harrisons' acquisitions continued, so the trio's friendship developed. On 17 February 1930, Cadell wrote to Marie-Louise: 'I must thank you both for a most enjoyable visit. It was a great pleasure to me to see my pictures *in situ* in your charming house, + to find them so much appreciated.'¹⁸ They commiserated with each other as the economic climate of the 1930s deteriorated, with Cadell lamenting on 6 April 1931:

Shipping certainly sounds depressing! But everything appears to be in a hopeless state and I have never known such depression in my trade as exists at present. I sell my things now at a quarter of what I got for them some years ago, + I furthermore sell very much fewer.¹⁹

In the face of Cadell's difficulty in selling work, the Harrisons considered commissioning him to paint an interior of their home, the genre for which he remains most celebrated. On 24 March 1932, he responded: 'If you want two 30 x 25" Interiors, I will be very pleased to do the "brace" for £150, which is as you know considerably below my usual charge of £100 to £150 for an interior that size.'²⁰ More problematic were the two portraits Cadell executed of Marie-Louise, during extended stays with the couple (Plate 4). On 20 September 1932, he reassured Marie-Louise: 'I promise to give you jet black hair not brown + to paint you sitting down in what you think suits you best, so

¹⁴ Ion R. Harrison, 'As I Remember Them', in T. J. Honeyman, *Three Scottish Colourists* (Edinburgh, 1950), 120. *Pink Azaleas* is reproduced in colour in Strang, *F. C. B. Cadell*, pl. 58.

¹⁵ A selection of these drawings were reproduced in F. C. B. Cadell, *Jack and Tommy* (London, 1916).

¹⁶ SNGMA, GMA A118/1, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 3 May 1928.

¹⁷ SNGMA, GMA A118/4, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 9 October 1929.

¹⁸ SNGMA, GMA A118/8, Letter from Cadell to Marie-Louise Harrison, 17 February 1930.

¹⁹ SNGMA, GMA A118/9, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 6 April 1931.

²⁰ SNGMA, GMA A118/13, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 24 March 1932.

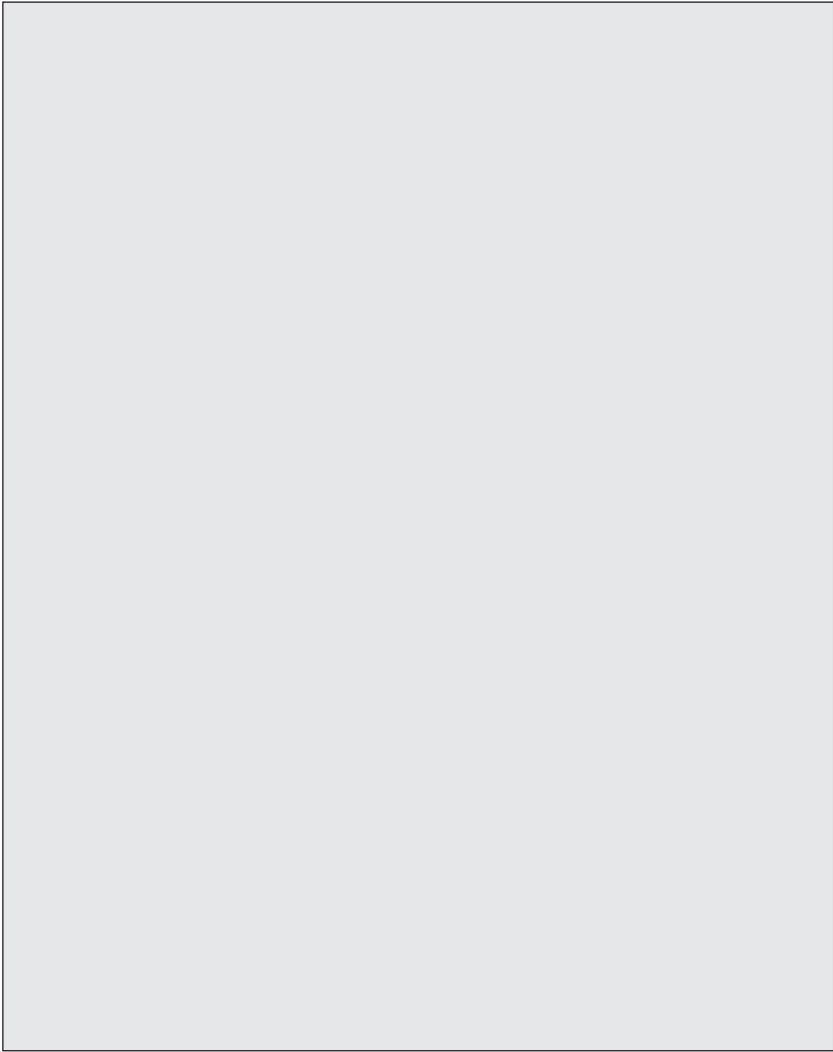


Plate 4 F. C. B. Cadell (1883–1937). *Mrs Ion R. Harrison*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Private collection. © The Estate of F. C. B. Cadell, courtesy of Portland Gallery, London.

long as it is simple + not of a complicated or minute pattern.²¹ To Harrison, he wrote on 26 September 1932: 'I will be very pleased to paint Mrs Harrison for £100 + hope very much that the portrait will be a great success.'²² However, by 5 November 1932, Cadell was explaining:

I have no doubt the right eye can be put right ... Sometimes when one has been working at one picture continuously for a bit such things are less evident to one than they would be after an interval of not seeing the picture. I am glad, however, that it is otherwise liked.²³

Eventually, Cadell began to ask the Harrisons to support him by lending works to his exhibitions. On 7 December 1933 he declared:

No – you really must lend me the interior ... I want to 'cut' a deal + that drawing room picture will be much admired. If you insist, your name need not appear in the catalogue + the picture will be catalogued simply as 'Interior – not for sale' ... So ... let me have it.²⁴

This was followed in January by a more gracious: 'Your pictures have been greatly admired + their presence helped the show very much.'²⁵

In the meantime, Cadell and Harrison's correspondence ranged from professional transactions to broader discussions about other artists. Cadell saved his highest praise for James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and his great friend Peploe. Of the former, Cadell explained:

He was a marvellous painter. The most exquisite of the 'Moderns', + he had what some great painters have – a certain 'amateurishness' ... I can best describe what I mean in these words: 'A gentleman painting for his amusement.' (Of course it must be understood that said 'gentleman' is a genius as well!).²⁶

Of Peploe, whose work the Harrisons also collected, Cadell wrote: 'I am glad you have bought Mr Peploe's still life. It is a very good one.'²⁷ They attended Peploe's funeral together in 1935, of which Harrison recalled: 'At the graveside Cadell was so distressed that he had to walk away from the mourners.'²⁸ In 1931, they commiserated over the death of G. L. Hunter (1877–1931), but of the fourth and final Scottish Colourist J. D. Fergusson (1874–1961), Cadell

²¹ SNGMA, GMA A118/27, Letter from Cadell to Marie-Louise Harrison, 20 September 1932.

²² SNGMA, GMA A118/29, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 26 September 1932.

²³ SNGMA, GMA A118/31, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 5 November 1932.

²⁴ SNGMA, GMA A118/42, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 7 December 1933.

²⁵ SNGMA, GMA A118/46, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 31 January 1934.

²⁶ SNGMA, GMA A118/35, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 20 January 1933.

²⁷ SNGMA, GMA A118/41, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 30 November 1933.

²⁸ Harrison, 'As I Remember Them', 124.

wrote in 1936: '[I was]... interested to hear of your having met Fergusson – I haven't seen him for ages – 1909 – I should think!'²⁹

As the 1930s progressed, Cadell's relationship with Harrison deepened. Cadell continued to visit the Harrisons and they spent time on Iona together during the summer of 1932.³⁰ Personal and professional highs and lows, such as Cadell's move to 30 Regent Terrace in Edinburgh in 1932, a catalogue of health problems, his election to the Royal Scottish Academy in 1936 and the enduring difficulty in selling works are discussed in their correspondence. Once settled in his new home, Cadell explained that he had:

been frightfully busy getting into this very charming house, which I feel sure you will like when you see it – overlooking Holyrood + with a splendid + almost highland view of Arthur's Seat. A perfect 'prospect' for a town house.³¹

He suffered from a catalogue of health problems, not least being mugged in 1932:

On my way home about 1 A. M. I was suddenly set on at the W. [*sic*] end of the Terrace, hit on the mouth + smacked down. Next thing I know was that my nose was pouring with blood, but to my surprise, rings, gold watch bracelet, money + keys were still on me.³²

and tripping down the stairs of a tram in 1934:

I fell down the stair of one of our infernal tram cars + landed on the tail-end of my spine on one of the metal-edged steps. Since then I have been unable to do anything but stand up or get on my side in bed.³³

On becoming an RSA, Harrison congratulated Cadell, who responded:

Many thanks for your cheery wire of congratulations, which I would have answered before had it not been that I was struck down by the Almighty with 'Flu' following the hour of my triumph!³⁴

During Cadell's final illness, the Harrisons provided much-appreciated support, not least sending him a bottle of whisky after he had written from the nursing home in Edinburgh where he was being treated:

²⁹ For Hunter see: SNGMA, GMA A118/12 and GMA A118/13, letters from Cadell to Harrison, 5 March 1932 and 24 March 1932. For Fergusson see: SNGMA, GMA A118/57 Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 18 September 1936.

³⁰ SNGMA, GMA A118/25, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 26 July 1932.

³¹ SNGMA, GMA A118/13, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 24 March 1932.

³² SNGMA, GMA A118/21, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 23 May 1932.

³³ SNGMA, GMA A118/50, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 24 November 1934.

³⁴ SNGMA, GMA A118/55, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 22 February 1936.

I eat almost nothing – not enough the sister says ‘to keep a sparrow alive’ – not being a sparrow however I still keep some hold on life. I have practically discarded my old friend the pipe. You kindly said you thought of sending me some whisky. But didn’t suppose I was allowed it. As a matter of fact it is the only intoxicant I am allowed, so a bottle would be very welcome to drink your health in.³⁵

Following Cadell’s death in Edinburgh on 6 December 1937, Harrison helped the artist’s sister, Jean Cadell, with plans to organise a memorial exhibition.³⁶ One was staged at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1938 and another at the National Gallery of Scotland in 1942. The latter was the last solo exhibition of Cadell’s work to be mounted in a public gallery until ‘The Scottish Colourist Series: F. C. B. Cadell’ at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 2011–12. As a result of this project and the generosity of the Harrison Family, the archival material under discussion was given to the gallery’s archive in 2014, a safe home where it will be cared for to professional standards and made available to researchers in perpetuity. Indeed, further long-loans and gifts of archival material relating to Cadell, Peploe and Fergusson have resulted from the ‘Scottish Colourist Series’, making the Gallery a central resource for the study of the Scottish Colourists and, more widely, for twentieth-century Scottish art and artists.³⁷ In particular, the Harrison gift stands as a lasting legacy of an exceptional relationship between an artist and a patron.³⁸

³⁵ SNGMA, GMA A118/64, Letter from Cadell to Harrison, 30 October 1937.

³⁶ SNGMA, GMA A118/69, Letter from Jean Cadell to Ion Harrison, 20 May [1938].

³⁷ Gifts include the following collections: GMA A112 (S. J. Peploe) and GMA A115 (J. D. Fergusson). Members of the public interested in consulting these items can view them by appointment by contacting gmaarchive@nationalgalleries.org or via telephone on 0131 624 6268. Further information on the archive collections is available on the NGS website, <http://www.nationalgalleries.org>.

³⁸ Thanks are due to the Harrison Family, John McKenzie and Mary Stevens.