

CONTEMPLATING PARADISE

by MICHAEL HALL

Restoration by the Soane Monuments Trust of the tomb Soane designed in 1784 for Miss Elizabeth Johnston has brought to light an intriguing pair of portraits. Are these the participants in a tragic story of seduction and betrayal?

ON a stroll through the churchyard of St Mary Abbots in Kensington, the architect Stefan Buzas noted with dismay the sad state of one of its most distinguished monuments. Although the tomb of Miss Elizabeth Johnston, who died in May 1784, “leaving tears and bitterness of heart the earthly portion of her disconsolate friends”, commemorates an obscure life, it was designed by no less an architect than John Soane. Yet the elegant Classical sarcophagus had for many years been in a parlous state, its crumbling marble damaged by rusting iron cramps and gently subsiding into the earth.

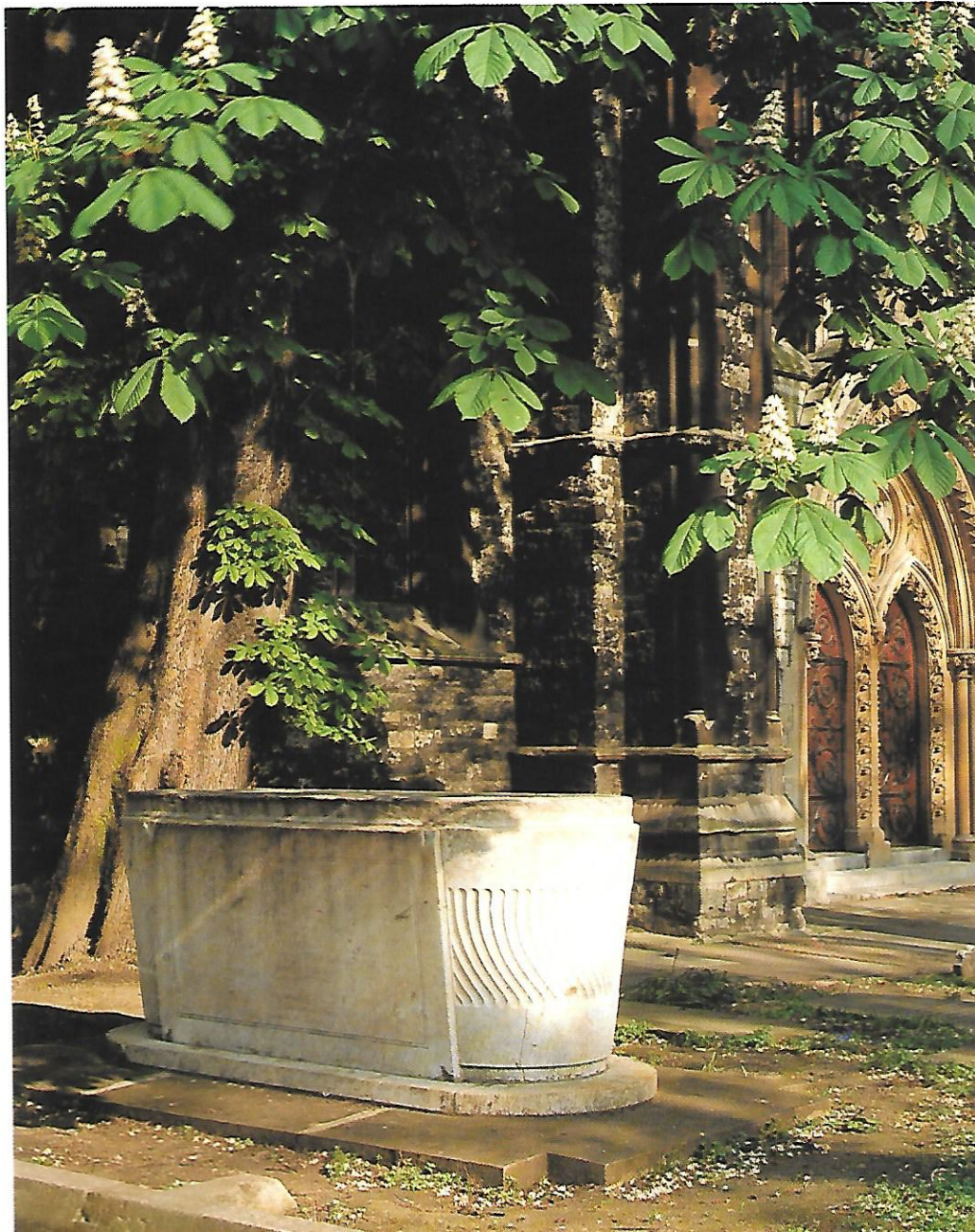
The neglect of such a fine work by one of his favourite architects prompted Mr Buzas, together with the interior designer Robin Moore Ede, to found the Soane Monuments Trust (COUNTRY LIFE, June 14, 1990). This charity raises money to restore—or encourage the restoration by others—of neglected monuments designed by Soane. Its first great success was the repair of the architect’s own mausoleum, in the churchyard of Old St Pancras parish church, London. This was followed by work on Miss Johnston’s tomb, both tasks being carried out by the architect Julian Harrap. The tomb has

been raised, the stonework repaired and cleaned and the disfiguring cramps removed, so that today the tomb, which was carved by John Hinchcliffe Snr, can be properly appreciated as one of the earliest manifestations of Soane’s genius for funerary architecture (Fig 1).

But who was Miss Johnston? Her tomb records that she was “the amiable and beloved eldest daughter of the late Mr Robert Johnston of Brompton Gentleman” (her name is spelled “Johnstone” in books on Soane, but this appears to be incorrect). However, the records in the Soane Museum revealed that it was commissioned by the Earl of Bellamont, a notorious Irish rake, prompting some speculation about his relationship with Miss Johnston. Publication of an article about the Soane Monuments Trust’s proposed restoration of the monument had an exciting result when one of the Earl’s descendants realised that a delightful pair of pastel portraits in his possession probably shows the Earl, Miss Johnston and their illegitimate son (Figs 2 and 3). The full story of this intriguing commission can now be told.

The amatory career of the Earl of Bellamont is the subject of a detailed footnote in the *Complete Peerage* (which also points out that the correct but never used spelling of his title was Bellomont). Born Charles Coote in 1738, he succeeded his cousin as Lord Coote of Coloony in 1766 and a year later was created Earl of Bellamont, in part for his success in quelling a rebellion in the north of Ireland. Educated in Geneva, where he absorbed advanced political opinions, he was a nobleman of style as well as substance, as is suggested by Reynolds’s famous full-length portrait, now in the National Gallery of Ireland, which shows him swaggering in the robes and ostrich plumes of the Order of the Bath. From his cousin he inherited Bellamont Forest in Co. Cavan, one of Edward Lovett Pearce’s most beautiful realisations of the Palladian ideal, to which he made notably sensitive additions (COUNTRY LIFE, May 21 and 28, 1964).

But all this impressed his contemporaries less than the snobbishness which led him to deliver his inaugural speech to the Irish House of Lords in French and to refer openly to his neighbours in Co. Cavan as “Hottentots”. In 1772 he fought a famous duel with Viscount Townshend, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, which left the Earl badly wounded in the groin, prompting the rumour that as a result he was unable to be a father. This he disproved by no fewer than 12 illegitimate



1—The tomb of Elizabeth Johnston at St

children, by five different mothers.

In 1774, clearly fearing that he would have no legitimate heirs, he obtained a baronetcy with special remainder to his eldest illegitimate son, Charles, born in 1765 to "Rebecca Palmer, otherwise Sheldon", as was specified in his will, of which the only known copy perished (with all Ireland's public records) in 1922, during the Civil War. Although Rebecca Palmer's name is mentioned in printed abstracts of the will, the mothers of his younger children seem not to have been recorded. In 1774 the Earl married a daughter of the 1st Duke of Leinster, by whom he had one son, who died young in 1786. The marriage was not a success and the couple eventually lived apart.

The two pastels, by the fashionable portrait painter John Russell, were known by their owner to depict the Earl, his second illegitimate son, also called Charles, and the child's unknown mother. The boy clutches a miniature copy of his father's portrait. This has since disappeared, but a matching miniature of his mother survives in family hands. It is possible that this is a portrait of Elizabeth Johnston: the boy was born in 1781 or '82 and so would have been about three when she died, which is a plausible age for the child in the picture, although the Earl himself looks rather younger than the 46 he then was. There is a long family tradition, borne out by contemporary gossip, that the Earl, as "Mr Coote", contracted a bigamous second marriage in England with the daughter of a respectable tradesman, and even the eminently discreet history of the Coote family by A. de Vlieger, published in 1900, records that the Earl's second illegitimate son was the offspring of a "private marriage".

It is not difficult to imagine that Elizabeth Johnston's story was tragic: did she ever realise how much she had been deceived by the man she probably loved? As for the Earl, his complex personality was summed up after his death in 1800 by John Gamble, who records a visit to Bellamont Forest in his *Sketches in Dublin and the North of Ireland*: "His ruling passion was an inordinate love of women . . . his excessive refinement and delicacy, and his excessive admiration of them in others, were the causes of his worst actions. He shrank with horror from the grossness of mercenary prostitution, from the touch of a female who had even once admitted the embraces of another man. The objects of modern gallantry, therefore, opera dancers and actresses, were beneath his attention; youth and beauty, loveliness and innocence, could only excite it: like Satan, he contemplated Paradise, and only entered it to destroy."

He was, however, remembered by Gamble as "a most excellent father", and



he took good care of all his offspring. The eldest son inherited the baronetcy created for him, and the boy shown in the portrait was bequeathed Bellamont Forest, where he died in 1842. The house was subsequently sold by his descendants (and the Earl's direct male line is now extinct), but they retained these intriguing portraits, which may well show the couple whose relationship prompted Soane's exquisite monument to despoiled virginity and an untimely death.

Contributions to the Soane Monuments Trust may be sent to the treasurer, the Hon. Piers Gibson, 25 Sumner Place, SW7 3NT. Further information may be obtained from the secretary, Robin Moore Ede, 21a Bruton Place, W1X 8JR.

Photographs: 1, Mark Fiennes; 2 and 3, Private collection.



2 and 3—Portraits by John Russell of the Earl of Bellamont (top); and (right) his second illegitimate son, Charles Coote, and the child's mother, perhaps Elizabeth Johnston