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CHANGING EDINBURGH

IAN CAMPBELL

I WOULD LIKE TONIGHT to talk about an Edinburgh in transition.¹ The subject of this winter's meetings of the Old Edinburgh Club, Edinburgh in the nineteenth century, is of course one of great variety; the century began with building, and ended with building, but between the buildings there was a world of difference, and between the two periods a world of change.

The changes which are obvious are perhaps not the ones I want to talk about: the spread North of the New Town, while the Old degenerated into something of a slum away from the professional heart of business; the driving of the railway through Princes Street Gardens; the spread of industrial Edinburgh, in city centre as well as suburb and in the docklands of Leith; the remorseless spread of suburban Edinburgh, with horse trams and finally cable cars to assist. These are well known, and they are the physical manifestation of a capital city in a century during which British prestige, British military and industrial power, and the sheer volume of manufacturing output made Edinburgh's rise and growth inevitable and fitting to Scotland's capital.

Less obvious is the literary city, a city at the start of the century in all the blaze of Sir Walter Scott's residence and patronage, and at the end still remembering Stevenson. Rosaline Masson's *I Can Remember Robert Louis Stevenson* is something of a neglected treasure, for while its intrinsic quality as a sketch of Stevenson's mind or art is modest, its insight into the life of Edinburgh in the latter half of the century is extraordinary. Obviously, although the glory of the Age of Scott had departed, Edinburgh was still alive with its circles and its societies, its groupings of professional men and women, and with the brilliancy which a major university gave, both in

its staff and its undergraduates.

I would like to take as a sample point of this brilliancy not the Stevenson end – which still has a good deal of research to be done into the names of literary nineteenth-century Edinburgh, the Aytouns and the Moirs, those who conducted *Blackwood's* after Christopher North, the great publishers and librarians whose reputations deserve more attention than they have so far received – but the earlier end, the Age of Scott and its aftermath.

We are familiar with Cockburn's magisterial pronouncement on the Age of Scott, and the excellence of Edinburgh as a literary centre in the early decades of the century.²

Its brilliancy was owing to a variety of peculiar circumstances which only operated during this period. The principal of these were – the survivance of several of the eminent men of the preceding age, and of curious old habits which the modern flood had not yet obliterated; the rise of a powerful community of young men of ability; the exclusion of the British from the Continent, which made this place, both for education and for residence, a favourite resort of strangers; the war, which maintained a constant excitement of military preparation, and of military idleness; the blaze of that popular literature which made this the second city in the empire for learning and science; and the extent, and the ease, with which literature and society embellished each other, without rivalry, and without pedantry. The first abstraction from this composition was by the deaths of our interesting old. Then London drew away several of our best young. There was a gap in the production of fresh excellence. Peace in 1815 opened the long closed floodgates, and gave to the Continent most of the strangers we used to get. A new race of peace-formed native youths came on the stage, but with little literature, and a comfortless intensity of political zeal; so that by about the year 1820 the old thing was much worn out, and there was no new thing, of the same piece, to continue or replace it. Much undoubtedly remained to make Edinburgh still, to those who knew how to use it, a city of Goshen, and to set us above all other British cities except one, and in some things above even that one. But the exact old thing [it] was not.

The last sentence is the telling one: 'the exact old thing [it] was not'.

In a century where reminiscence and nostalgia were to become hallmarks of Scottish writing about Scotland, Cockburn's judicious attitude, a looking-back on a beloved city in a time of transition, is all the more valuable.

He starts with the self-evidently true: Edinburgh is a city unnaturally brilliant during a period when the Napoleonic wars have closed off continental Europe. He could have added that that influx from the South had two factors to help it. One was the very popularity of Scott's poetry, which had spread to the world the idea of a picturesque Scotland of natural beauty and Gothic ruin, hill and glen and music and beauty, which greatly assisted the urge to make the long journey North. One only thinks of the feelings that animated the coach which brought Jeanie Deans from London back North to Roseneath to imagine oneself into a state of mind of visitors to Scotland, to Edinburgh, in the footsteps not only of Scott's poetry but of *Humphry Clinker*, and soon of Lockhart's maliciously brilliant *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*. In wartime, and soon after, there was good reason to come to Edinburgh, good literary reason to imagine that the journey was worth while. And the second factor, worth mentioning, is that of course the conditions under which the journey was made had vastly improved, alas partly for military reasons (to allow troops in should Scotland prove restless again after 1746), partly as part of the advancement of the kingdom which was part of the Enlightenment. Jeanie Deans' heroic journey Southwards had no need to be repeated Northwards: with Argyle's large purse to provide a coach, the roads were there for a pleasant trip to Scotland, and Scott himself was to be a frequent traveller.

Of course the roads took people South as well as North, and Cockburn is quick to note that peace in 1815 began a terrible drain on Edinburgh's talent.

But the process took time, and it is worth now turning to my other sample point for this period in Edinburgh's history. It is less well-known than Cockburn's *Memorials*, but not the less vivid in its evocation of a city at the height of its power in the wartime years of the early century. Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, as published in 1881, did not include his account of Christopher North, but this most intensely Edinburgh of chapters was added in the 1932 version, and from it we can glean one of Carlyle's marvellous pen-portraits of a city he remembered with total clarity in 1867, fifty and more years after the scene he described.³

In my student days the chosen Promenade of Edinburgh was Princes Street; from the East end of it, to and fro, westward as far as Frederick Street, or farther if you wished to be less jostled, and have the pavement more to yourself: there, on a bright afternoon, in its highest bloom probably about 4-5 P.M., all that was brightest in Edinburgh seemed to have stepped out to enjoy, in the fresh pure air, the finest city-prospect in the world and the sight of one another, and was gaily streaming this way and that. From Castle Street or even the extreme west there was a visible increase of bright population, which thickened regularly eastward, and in the sections near the Register Office or extreme east, had become fairly a lively crowd, dense as it could find stepping-ground, - never needed to be denser, or to become a crush, so many side-streets offering you free issue all along, and the possibility of returning by a circuit, instead of abruptly on your steps. The crowd was lively enough, brilliant, many-coloured, many-voiced, clever-looking (beautiful and graceful young womankind a conspicuous element): crowd altogether elegant, polite, and at its ease tho' on parade; something as if of unconsciously rhythmic in the movements of it, as if of harmonious in the sound of its cheerful voices, bass and treble, fringed with the light laughers; a quite pretty kind of natural concert and rhythmus of march; into which, if at leisure, and carefully enough dressed (as some of us seldom were) you might introduce yourself, and flow for a turn or two with the general flood. It was finely convenient to a stranger in Edinburgh, intent to employ his eyes in instructive recreation; and see, or hope to see, so much of what was brightest and most distinguished in the place, on those easy terms. As for me I never could afford to promenade or linger there; and only a few times, happened to float leisurely thro', on my way elsewhere. Which perhaps makes it look all the brighter now in far-off memory, being so rare as, in one

sense, it surely is to me! Nothing of the same kind now remains in Edinburgh; already in 1832, you in vain sought and inquired Where the general promenade, then, was? The general promenade was, and continues, nowhere – as so many infinitely nobler things already do!

Carlyle immediately confirms in his picture Cockburn's impression of a city in its intellectual prime, easy, assured, self-consciously citizens of what could still be seen as a kind of Modern Athens. It is a confirmation from a rather different point of view from Cockburn's; Carlyle was at the time a poor undergraduate, and he self-consciously notes he was not well enough dressed to join the general promenade, as we may be sure Cockburn would have done, easily. The picture in Scott's journal of the comings and goings of legal and literary circles, the meetings we know took place in Constable's and Blackwood's, in the debating societies and taverns, were the meetings of a city in motion.

Christopher North was a feature of that city in motion: when Carlyle first saw him, striding impetuously down Princes Street that sunny afternoon in 1814, he was just rising to his prime. Already he was known for his books; in another three years, he would (with Lockhart) raise a storm when he took the infant *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* by the scruff of the neck, and with its seventh number (the first he edited) blow a storm of controversy through Edinburgh, bringing roars of anger, threats of legal action, horror – and very profitable publicity, with steadily rising circulation.

In 1820, with his shameless elevation to the chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University, Wilson was again to be the centre of controversy. Appallingly little prepared for the chair, he nevertheless gained it by political patronage, and soon made a name for himself as a lecturer who attracted huge crowds, far more than the nominal size of his student audience. Again, we look to Carlyle's keen eye to describe what kind of a personality could have this kind of impact on a city.⁴

It was about a dozen years more, before I knew anything personally of Wilson, or almost even had seen the face of him again. His *Isle of Palms* I had read, and recognised the flush of fine sensibilities, efflorescences and talents there; but found all in too unripe a state, and of little use to me in that stage of their and my development. Next in order, and what I remember better, in the *Edinburgh Review* there by and by came out a *Paper on Byron* by him; eloquently descanting with abundance of sympathy, and in a great poetic style, on the abysses of Human Life, on Rousseau's *Confessions* and the Byronic character; – in a somewhat too grandiloquent and as it were *plethoric* strain, thought I. *Trials of Margaret Lindsay*, which was very popular years afterwards in good Scotch houses, I had also read; again with considerable love and approval, but without change in the above exceptional clauses. 'A human character of fine and noble elements,' thought I; but not at one with itself: an exuberant enough, leafy and tropical kind of tree rather exhaling itself in balmy odours than producing fruit.

In the meanwhile, too, perhaps about midway between *Margaret Lindsay* and the *Isle of Palms*, the far bigger and still more questionable efflorescences in *Blackwood's Magazine* had taken place, and were provoking endless loud criticism from all the world; to me also questionable, but disclosive of singular new qualities in the man; wild explosions quasi-volcanic of multifarious half-fused conglomerate, – masses of rugged grotesque human sense; of scorching satire, torrents of wild human fun, not without touches almost of human blackguardism, striving to combine themselves with something of heroic pride, and with notably much of religious piety, – these phenomena were certainly wonderful if not admirable; and Wilson had become a conspicuous public man, whom in many points I valued as one of the most gifted, and whom at any rate both for his singular gifts, and even for the singular deficiencies conjoined, one could not but be willing to know, should opportunity ever come.

The interesting work which remains to be done on Edinburgh in the nineteenth century is on the effect of the 'conspicuous public man' on the city. For these two extensive sets of quotations, Cockburn's and Carlyle's, allow us to see something of the nature of the change overtaking the city as the nineteenth century progressed.

First, the relatively small circles Cockburn exulted in were split up, diluted, distributed, all but destroyed by the very forces Cockburn recognised in the *Memorials* – the end of wartime pressures, the coming of improved communications, the cultural influences from the South and further afield which

swept away the kind of Scottish eccentrics which had made legal Edinburgh in Cockburn's youth such a fascinating place. We get a sense of that Edinburgh in Stevenson's *Weir of Hermiston*, or Aytoun's *Norman Sinclair*, and we see it evoked vividly (and we may be sure from personal experience) in the early chapters of *Redgauntlet* where young Alan Fairford tries his (Englished) legal talents before the crusty old Scottish judges, while his thoroughly Scottish father looks on proudly. Between Saunders Fairford and his son there is a great gulf fixed; the gulf between an old Edinburgh of legal luminaries and the old ways, and a new Edinburgh moving remorselessly towards something more international – blander perhaps, but more in keeping with a world where soon the railway would bring Edinburgh within half a day of London, and the steamship within a few days of New York.

In such an Edinburgh there was still room for conspicuous public men – Wilson and his *Noctes Ambrosianae*, herculean writing feats which animated *Blackwood's* for decades – Aytoun, Moir, John Stuart Blackie, and Saintsbury at the very end of our period – but they were men increasingly to be savoured in print rather than met on Princes Street or in the High Street. Carlyle in 1832 asked where the *general* promenade was: his letters of that period from Edinburgh, visiting the New Town after an absence of several years, testify to the quietness of everything, the grass growing in the cobbles, the village atmosphere. The interesting young were at work, or on the high road to England: the interesting old were dying off (as Scott was, in 1832), and Carlyle himself was to move to London in 1834 leaving the field in Edinburgh to the likes of Wilson, who had a wary respect for Carlyle though they were poles apart in politics, and in literature. Had Carlyle stayed, *Blackwood's* might not have had the paramount influence it did: had the Reform Bill not passed, Jeffrey might not have moved to London, and in his turn Carlyle might have stayed in Edinburgh or its neighbourhood as one of Jeffrey's closest friends.

But this is speculation. The early 1830s took away Scott, took Lockhart and Hogg to London, took Carlyle to a new career in Chelsea. To be sure, the new peace-formed native youth was there – Wilson its most conspicuous example – but it could not be (in Cockburn's words) the 'exact old thing'. And perhaps it is as well.

To return to a point made earlier, nostalgia was to be one of the characteristics of the century in Scottish writing, and the kailyard grew in such fertile soil. It is striking to see the success of a book like Dean Ramsay's *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character*, and trace it to its essentially backward character. Writing a preface to the *twenty-second* edition Ramsay attributed its success in the fifteen years since publication to features very much related to those we have looked at in the early decades of the century:⁵

The demand for a twenty-second edition of a volume of 'Scottish Reminiscences' embracing subjects which are necessarily of a limited and local character – a demand which has taken place during the course of little more than fifteen years since its first publication – proves, I think, the correctness of the idea upon which it was first undertaken – viz. that it should depict a phase of national manners which was fast passing away, and thus, in however humble a department, contribute something to the materials of history, by exhibiting social customs and habits of thought which at a particular era were characteristic of a race. It may perhaps be very fairly said that the *Reminiscences* came out at a time especially suitable to rescue these features of national life and character from oblivion. They had *begun* to fade away, and many had, to the present generation, become obsolete.

Ramsay, early in his work, divided Scots into those who are old enough to have seen things 'really changed about them', some 'in a transition state', some with 'changes threatened' but not yet begun. For all, Ramsay's response was to offer 'quaint Scottish humour' and details of the past, and the book's success is a matter of record.

Yet the passage quoted, to do justice to Ramsay, shows him more than a mere retailer of quaint anecdote – though in justice it must be said this is the

predominant impression of a lengthy reading of his collection of short pieces. Ramsay sees, taking the larger view, that change is not something regular and uniform, but affecting different people different ways. So long as this consciousness exists, and persists, in Scottish writing, then the changes of the nineteenth century could be written about, from Scott's noble portrait of change in *Redgauntlet*, through George MacDonald's and Margaret Oliphant's pictures of a changing Scotland, to Stevenson's great fictions at the end of the century, and at the very end the magisterial survey of a ruined country in *The House with the Green Shutters*. To pile anecdote on anecdote, substituting anecdotes of the past for analysis of a changing present, is the besetting sin of the kailyard. Typically, change comes to the kailyard slow and late (since the setting is so out of the way), and typically it is resisted as long as possible on the ground that the old way is best. Typically, the kailyard stage is held by the older men who remember the old ways: the younger ones, peripheralised, have a lot to learn. In this way, the reader has the illusion of a pleasing timelessness.

Cockburn and Carlyle give the most valuable impetus to Scottish writing in the way they handle the past, and change in the past. To each, looking back, there was an attractive Scotland, and attractive Edinburgh – *and it ended*. In exactly the same technique as Grassie Gibbon employed at the end of *Sunset Song*, Cockburn and Carlyle evoked the past of their earlier years vividly, gave the reader an insight and the sense of vicarious enjoyment – and killed it off. To kill it off is to recognise that change is inevitable: the exact old thing it cannot be. To duck this realisation is to live in a Scotland, an Edinburgh full of history, and presenting to the modern eye a historical picture of astonishing beauty and variety. But to face up to this change is to realise that appearances and reality are different, and war against each other every day for those who live in the present. It was to be in tracing out how the exact old thing could not be, that much of the century's most interesting writing was to find its power.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 This paper was delivered as a talk to the Old Edinburgh Club as part of a series on nineteenth-century Edinburgh during the winter of 1993–94.
- 2 Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time* (Edinburgh 1856), pp. 212–213.
- 3 Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, edited by Ian Campbell (Everyman University Library, London 1972), pp. 366–367.
- 4 Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, pp. 368–369.
- 5 Dean Ramsay, *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (Edinburgh 1872), p. 2.