

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, The Journal for Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

Content © The Old Edinburgh Club and contributors. All rights reserved.

For further information about the BOEC, including contents of previous issues and indexes, see <https://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/boec>.

This article is made available for your personal research and private study only.

For any further uses of BOEC material please contact the Editor, The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, at editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk.

Digitised by the Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library from the copy in the Library Collection.



Edinburgh Portraits

WILLIAM SMELLIE, FRS, FSA Scot, 1740–1795

STEPHEN BROWN

BORN AT THE PLEASANCE outside Edinburgh in 1740, William Smellie was the son and grandson of trade deacons and master builders, his father having designed and constructed the Martyrs Tomb in Greyfriars Churchyard. His family, who owned property in the area of St Leonards, were Cameronians, and William Smellie received his grammar school education in Duddingston.¹ He first came to reside in Edinburgh when he was apprenticed to the printing firm of Hamilton, Balfour and Neil in October 1752,² after which he was never more than a day's travel from the city whose intellectual eclecticism and enthusiasm Smellie himself came to embody. In 1763, Smellie married Jean Robertson, the daughter of an army agent; they had thirteen children, eight of whom, four sons and four daughters, survived their father. Smellie's son Alexander succeeded him in his printing firm at the foot of the Anchor Close,³ and his daughter Rebecca married the portrait painter George Watson. Another son, John, went to sea, serving first in the Portuguese wine trade, then aboard a merchantman engaged on the tea run and eventually as an officer on a man-of-war. His extant correspondence with William and Alexander Smellie over a number of years provides a compelling insight into a young Scot's naval career.⁴

A familiar of both Adam Smith and David Hume, Smellie, through his career as a printer, and his success as an editor, translator, writer, and natural historian, became a close friend of Lord Buchan, Robert Burns, William Creech, William Cullen, Sir John Dalrymple, Charles Elliot, Lord Kames, Maria Riddell and Gilbert Stuart.⁵ William Smellie figures in some way in the discussion of almost any individual

or any aspect of Edinburgh intellectual life in the last third of the eighteenth century; however, since Robert Kerr's *Memoirs* in 1811, there has been no study given over entirely to the life of Edinburgh's 'learned printer'.⁶

Smellie first gained recognition in Edinburgh while yet an apprentice, when he was awarded a silver medal by the Edinburgh Philosophical Society in 1758 for a near perfect edition of Terence. He was released from indentures in 1759, when he joined the firm of Sands, Murray and Cochrane at a salary of sixteen shillings a week. His contract also provided him with the opportunity to absent himself from business in order to attend lectures at the University. This Smellie did with considerable dedication, pursuing studies in medicine, botany, Hebrew and moral philosophy, without taking a degree. At one point he was nominated by Professor John Hope to continue the lectures in botany when Hope himself fell ill. Smellie would afterwards seek the advice and criticism of Principal Robertson when setting out the Prospectus for his own *Philosophy of Natural History*.⁷ Robertson and Hope would both subsequently underwrite Smellie's first independent business venture, contributing £70 towards his partnership with Balfour and Auld in 1765.

While Smellie established a number of crucial friendships and intellectual contacts during his time with Sands, Murray and Cochrane, it was his editorship of the *Scots Magazine* that most shaped his early career (1760–65). Smellie is the magazine's first fully identified editor; his contract, extant among his papers in the archives of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, calls for him to solicit and edit contributions. Smellie also contributed reviews and historical



William Smellie, drawn by John Brown, c. 1783. (On loan from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; Scottish National Portrait Gallery, PG L64.)

essays to the *Scots Magazine*, and printed Henry Mackenzie's earliest poetry.⁸ Smellie's eclecticism is evident in the issues he edited between 1760 and 1765, and the experience had a lasting influence in Smellie's attraction to the magazine format and his notion that such a form of periodical publication was the best journalistic means of public education.

When Smellie drafted his prospectus for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1767, its octavo format was much more reminiscent of a magazine than of the encyclopaedia of Ephraim Chambers (1728), the *Britannica's* ostensible progenitor.⁹

As a printer, Smellie was a partner in some of Edinburgh's most successful publishing concerns in

the last quarter of the eighteenth century. After a brief business venture with John Balfour and Robert and William Auld (1765-71), Smellie worked in contracted arrangements with John Balfour (1771-80) and William Creech (1778-90), and his firm was eventually absorbed by Constable after the death of Smellie's son Alexander.¹⁰ As a printer Smellie appears to have been both a boon and a bane to his partners; his intelligence, his gifts as a writer, and his familiarity with the city's intelligentsia made Smellie especially learned and informed. But his penchant for self-direction and his tendency to pursue his own interests at the expense of his publisher's contracts resulted in a series of bad endings to his partnerships. Auld, Balfour and Creech each broke off his association with Smellie in some despair and with complaints on all sides about the mishandling of accounts.¹¹ Inasmuch as both Balfour and Creech had extremely successful careers before and after their alliances with Smellie, one must assume that the fault lay mostly with Smellie. Certainly Smellie proved unable to make any kind of financial success of his own career as a printer despite his association with some of the century's most successful authors and publishing ventures, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Robert Burns not the least of these.

In the case of the *Britannica*, Smellie was contracted by the engraver Andrew Bell and his partner Colin McFarquhar to amass and edit the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Smellie began the task late in 1767 with a prospectus and application for subscriptions issued under his own imprint and calling for an edition in octavo.¹² Smellie finally brought out a three-volume quarto edition in 1771, but only after much confusion in the issuing of individual parts of the encyclopaedia and with the considerable dissatisfaction of his partners. Smellie received in total only £200 for his efforts. He appears to have lost the initial subscription list and very few copies of the original edition have survived, most of

these imperfect. A middling quality first issue of Smellie's *Britannica* recently sold at auction for £12,000.¹³ Smellie seems to have had a number of unsold copies remaining unbound on his premises; these appear to have been shipped to London and to have provided the basis for a London printing of the first edition of the *Britannica* in 1773.¹⁴ The venture was in the last analysis something of a fiasco. When Bell and McFarquhar began to plan a second edition, Smellie was not involved.¹⁵ The third edition realised £42,000 and brought substantial profits to all participants in the venture, even the warehouseman James Hunter and the corrector of the press, John Brown.¹⁶ But Smellie shared in none of this, and despite working for three years largely on his own to produce the first edition, he appears, in fact, to have lost money. Still, his single-handed efforts on the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia* were an indisputable intellectual achievement, something akin to Dr Johnson's on the *Dictionary*. Smellie's *Encyclopaedia* is nothing like the subsequent editions of the *Britannica*, which show the clear influence of the French encyclopaedists; his was rather in the tradition of the periodical essayist, a more native and idiosyncratic form of disseminating knowledge.¹⁷

Twice in the 1770s Smellie considered relocating to London. He wrote to William Strahan in 1774 describing the volume of his business as providing £200 income annually in Edinburgh and complaining about his partner Balfour's failure to take on new literary ventures.¹⁸ Strahan seems to have encouraged Smellie and may have considered hiring him to oversee printing operations for his growing London business – that is certainly the tenor of their correspondence.¹⁹ And Smellie definitely gave further thought to going south when his friendship with Gilbert Stuart (and especially their partnership in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*) brought close familiarity with Stuart's London publisher John Murray. Murray seems to have had a hand in helping

Smellie sell the unbound sheets from the first edition of the *Britannica* to a London publisher. But it is not possible to imagine Smellie apart from Edinburgh; he certainly lacked the business sense necessary to make a go of things in London and, at any rate, by the mid 1770s, he was too well established as a literary personality in Edinburgh to have been transplantable in any fortunate way to the South. Smellie had begun to make of his Anchor Close print shop a centre for literary and intellectual exchange, and at Douglas's Tavern at the top of Anchor Close he had become the host and chief wit among the Crochallan Fencibles. Still, it is an obvious instance of Smellie's self-destructive inhibitions as a businessman that he twice failed to pursue overtures from prominent Scots at the heart of the London trade.²⁰

A relocation to London seems to have been just another of the schemes which preoccupied Smellie and kept him from despair in the face of his unending financial difficulties. But when literary fame brought the promise of economic windfall, and when that windfall actually descended upon his establishment, Smellie was incapable of sustaining it, let alone compounding his financial advantages. Smellie came into potential money-making book-trade enterprises on at least five occasions in his career. The first was his involvement with William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine*. Smellie not only thoroughly revised and edited Buchan's first 'home doctor' but also persuaded his medical friend to undertake publication on a much more lucrative scale.²¹ While the volume ran through scores of printings, Smellie's take was only £30. Next came the financial debacle of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s first edition (1768–71), to be followed by Smellie's partnership with Gilbert Stuart, William Creech and Charles Elliot in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*.²² Smellie's manuscript papers contain a number of letters indicating a serious mishandling on his part of the subscriptions for the *Magazine and Review*; he

had developed a chronic inability to reply to correspondence with subscribers and Scottish booksellers with anything like promptness. But it was Stuart's satiric challenges to Lord Monboddo in particular, and the *Magazine and Review*'s other salacious if less notorious assaults on the publications of the day, that doomed what might have been a highly successful undertaking.²³ Legal actions for libel were twice brought against Smellie as printer of this periodical. Smellie and Stuart developed in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review* a style much like that of the later Scots reviewers, but Smellie's mismanagement and Stuart's poor judgement cost their partners a potential success in the 1770s on a par with the later *Edinburgh Review* or *Blackwood's*.

Smellie next turned his attention to translating Buffon's massive *Natural History*; to do so he had to teach himself French. The project almost matches that of the first edition of the *Britannica* for its intellectual audacity. Smellie's is a free translation of Buffon, shorter than the original although still nine volumes in length, and incorporating a good deal of the translator's own notions about natural history. While the translation succeeded as an intellectual venture, and initially brought Smellie a good financial return, he again mishandled the longer term possibilities for further monetary gain, lost money on the extremely expensive engravings, and created considerable bad feeling with Cadell and Strahan over his bungled negotiations for the London publication rights.²⁴ What is perhaps most remarkable about Smellie's financial career is its resilience and his capacity to recover his reputation on a regular basis. In 1786, and despite previous disappointments with Smellie, Charles Elliot advanced one thousand guineas for the first volume only of Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History*, an offer made on the basis of the prospectus alone. It was the largest advance for a single volume of a work of that kind paid by a Scottish publisher in the eighteenth

century.²⁵ That first volume duly appeared in 1790; but the second volume was long delayed, and only a fortnight before he died Smellie was writing to Elliot attempting to renegotiate terms for the complete edition and to obtain a better settlement for subsequent printings.²⁶ The final text appeared posthumously in 1799. Smellie also failed to capitalise on having proposed the original concept for the *Statistical Account*, which he first outlined in a report to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He never followed through on the project, however, and the Society's publisher, William Creech, took and developed Smellie's idea in a proposal to Sir John Sinclair.

As a writer on political and social issues Smellie shows considerable sympathy for the sentiments presented in Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Smellie's *Natural History* is far more speculative than Buffon's and shows a penchant in its second volume for exploring psychological questions, particularly in the chapters 'On Dreams' and 'On Love'. From his earliest published work (an essay which received an award from the Select Society²⁷), Smellie's writing is distinguished by its pursuit of what is ultimately inexplicable: the mystery of moral consciousness in humanity. Thus, late in life, he turned to biography, conceiving a massive national project, the 'Biographia Scotia', for which he completed the lives of Hume, Smith, Kames and Gregory, which were published posthumously by his son Alexander Smellie in 1800. This obsession in Smellie's writing with the moral life and the moral impulse is no doubt the inspiration for the hagiographic quality of most of what has been written about him by his early biographers Kerr and Jardine; however, Smellie's fascination with moral philosophy was as much a function of his appreciation of how hard-won moral behaviour was in life, and how potentially manipulative in private practice and public politics the moral impulse could be. His repulsion at the hypocrisy of Scottish morals brought

Smellie close to two young contemporaries, Robert Burns and Maria Riddell, and involved him in the pamphlet wars of Edinburgh Town Council politics throughout the 1770s and 1780s.²⁸

Smellie's friendship with Burns is well known and began when Smellie printed the Edinburgh edition of Burns's poems for William Creech. Burns joined Smellie at the Crochallan Fencibles, where the printer is reputed to have had the best of the poet in a number of challenges to ribaldry. Despite his reputation for moral rectitude (largely a fiction constructed by his first biographer, Robert Kerr), Smellie's associations with Gilbert Stuart and Robert Burns reveal a man much given to pornographic wit. In fact, the Victorian image of Smellie the learned printer and paterfamilias is constructed in bold denial of Smellie's great appetites for drink, obscenity and debauchery. Smellie's correspondence throughout his life with his friend Dr Samuel Charteris, his *Dunciad*-like scatological attack on the town politics of the Edinburgh Set in the 1770s, his love of vulgar punning in his letters with Burns (mostly destroyed by Robert Kerr), his days and nights of Burton Ale consumption with Gilbert Stuart, all give evidence of a much more complex figure than the one portrayed in the standard lives. Smellie wrote with brilliance about the civil law and the moral state but pursued in his private life (much as James Boswell did) a course of explicitly contradictory behaviour. In that too, he embodied his beloved city of Edinburgh perfectly: a convention of learned societies and cellar taverns.

Perhaps the most revealing of Smellie's personal relationships was with the young poet and friend to Burns, Maria Riddell. Smellie met Mrs Riddell through Burns and in the last years of his life he carried on a full and moving correspondence of which seventeen letters survive.²⁹ Smellie counselled and instructed this young woman given to free thinking and speculation, encouraging her in her reading of William Godwin and in her questioning of the foun-

dations of Christian belief, even as he carried on a simultaneous correspondence with his own son John, who, seeking a berth in a man-of-war, was constantly writing to his father, not in search of ideas to free his mind from Presbyterian repressiveness, but in pursuit of pounds to free himself from gambling debts and to purchase the accessories requisite to a young naval officer's vanity.

William Smellie is an unusual man because he was so complete a man. He was a crucial figure in the Edinburgh Enlightenment both for what he was and what his life represented: he was a printer by trade but a leading intellectual force by right of natural talent. Smellie was a founding member of both the Newtonian Society at the University of Edinburgh and the Crochallan Fencibles, a drinking club at Douglas's Tavern in the Anchor Close. He very nearly became Professor of Natural History at Edinburgh University, and when his patron failed him his sense of injustice was so strong that he became one of the driving forces behind the establishment of a new learned society in Edinburgh, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. As the Society's first Keeper and Secretary, Smellie personally carried the chest containing the Society's curiosities from lodging to lodging until a permanent home was secured.³⁰ He

also very nearly cost the Society its Royal Charter by declaring his intention to give public lectures on Natural History for the Society in direct competition with Professor John Walker who had won the University chair over Smellie. Only Lord Buchan's personal admonition brought Smellie to heel on this matter. Still, Smellie was the only Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries never to miss a single meeting, according to the Minutes in the Antiquaries' archives, although at the same time he failed to meet several contractual deadlines in his various printing arrangements with Elliot and Creech. Smellie never wanted for friends despite his undependability, and he was never without allies in business and politics even when his failures had become many and public; he set up as an independent printer in the first instance on a personal surety of £500 from Lord Kames³¹ and on his deathbed Smellie wrote to Sir William Forbes requesting £1000 to rescue that business.³² When he died on 24 June 1795, Smellie's world had never extended much beyond the villages surrounding Edinburgh; his notion of a journey was walking to Leith to take the waters when he fell terminally ill in 1794. Smellie is buried in Greyfriars Churchyard next to the monument of the Adam family – theirs the fabric, his the spirit, of Enlightenment Edinburgh.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Three volumes of Smellie's letters, essays and notes in manuscript were deposited with the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in the nineteenth century (MSS 592, 593, 594). These are presently undergoing procedures for conservation. I have prepared a detailed description of and an index to the manuscripts for deposit with the library of the Museum of Antiquities and at the National Library of Scotland (NLS). Conservation will be completed by the summer of 1996, with the database accessible in the winter of 1995. The database and complete papers will correct over one thousand errors and omissions in Kerr's *Memoirs of Smellie*.

1 Robert Kerr, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of William Smellie* (Edinburgh 1811), I,

pp. 15–16. See also Sir William Jardine, Bt. 'Memoir of William Smellie', in *The Naturalist's Library*, vol. 25, *British Birds* (Edinburgh 1843).

2 The formal agreement is extant in the manuscripts of William Smellie in the archives of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

3 See *Reminiscences of a Visit to Mr. Smellie's Printing House at the Foot of the Anchor Close*, attributed to Robert Chambers and reprinted in several formats throughout the nineteenth century.

4 Twenty letters extant in the manuscript holdings of the Society of Antiquaries. See Kerr, *Memoirs of Smellie*, I, pp. 292–294.

5 See manuscript papers and letters.

- 6 Kerr's *Memoirs of Smellie* are extremely unreliable. He expurgated most of the manuscript materials and destroyed properties which he found unsavoury, including many letters of Smellie to and from Robert Burns and Gilbert Stuart. In other cases Kerr has rewritten letters in his 1811 volumes, correcting grammar and syntax and rephrasing much of the material. All references should be collated with the manuscripts wherever possible.
- 7 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 8 David Stuart M. Imrie, *The Scots Magazine: A Bicentenary Study* (Edinburgh 1939), pp. 59, 219; originally published in *Scots Magazine* (January-June 1939).
- 9 *Prospectus for the Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh 1767); there is a copy in the National Library of Scotland.
- 10 See manuscript papers and letters; see also Kerr, *Memoirs of Smellie*, I, p. 340.
- 11 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 12 See note 9.
- 13 At a Phillips auction in Glasgow, 12 May 1993. The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was reprinted in a facsimile edition by the University of Chicago Press in 1968.
- 14 The preface to the London edition is particularly intriguing for its ironic references to Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, especially the discussion of the entry on bees. The authorship of the 1773 preface is undeclared, but the style is suggestive of the review work of both Stuart and Smellie for the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*.
- 15 Most discussions of Smellie's absence from subsequent editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* recount an unfounded anecdote which describes Smellie declining to participate because McFarquhar wished to include biography in the second edition. This would be an odd bit of punctiliousness on Smellie's part, especially when we consider his subsequent start on the 'Biographia Scotia', a projected encyclopaedia of biography. The anecdote seems mere historical face-saving on the part of Smellie's later biographers. Surely Bell and McFarquhar, having suffered through considerable difficulties and disagreements with Smellie, wisely elected to exclude him from their second effort with the *Britannica*.
- 16 John Kay, *A Series of Original Portraits and Character Etchings*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1837-38) I, pp. 206-210.
- 17 Smellie used an essayistic style in the *Encyclopaedia* that is reminiscent of his efforts in both the *Scots Magazine* and the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*. His articles are often very personal and particular in the style of the *Spectator*, or later of Henry Mackenzie in the *Mirror* and the *Lounger*.
- 18 Smellie later moved to a partnership with Creech because of the latter's reputation for seeking out new properties. We should remember that Smellie was the first to publish Henry Mackenzie in the *Scots Magazine*.
- 19 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 20 See correspondence with John Murray and William Strahan in manuscript papers and letters.
- 21 Buchan originally intended to issue his book in parts from his practice in England, but Smellie urged him to seek subscriptions and to publish in Edinburgh. See manuscript papers and letters.
- 22 See contract in manuscript papers. Also of interest is Smellie's definition of a Scottish book reviewer in the manuscript papers.
- 23 William Zachs, *Without Regard to Good Manners: A Biography of Gilbert Stuart* (Edinburgh 1992), pp. 63-95. See documents relating to legal actions against the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review* in the manuscript papers and letters.
- 24 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 25 Kerr, *Memoirs of Smellie*, II, p. 263.
- 26 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 27 Reprinted by Alexander Smellie in *Characteristical Lives of John Gregory, M.D., Henry Home, Lord Kames, David Hume, Esq., and Adam Smith, L.L.D.* (Edinburgh 1800); no copy of the original pamphlet is extant.
- 28 See partial manuscript of 'An Address to the Citizens of Edinburgh' in archives of the Society of Antiquaries. It is written in imitation of Pope's *Dunciad*.
- 29 See manuscript papers and letters.
- 30 William Smellie, *An Account of the Institution and Progress of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1782-84).
- 31 See manuscript papers and letters; see also Kerr, *Memoirs of Smellie*, I, pp. 340-341.
- 32 See manuscript papers and letters.