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Edinburgh Portrait

GREYFRIARS' BOBBY – DOG OR MYTH?

SARA STEVENSON

IN 1984, when Peter Fletcher Riddell's family generously gave his magnificent collection of photographs to the National Photography Collection at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, numerous important works came to light. Amongst the smaller photographs is an anonymous *carte de visite* of a dog, and written underneath is the inscription 'Greyfriars' Bobby'.



Greyfriars' Bobby. (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, National Photography Collection, PGPR 831.)

Looking at the surprisingly extensive literature in print on this wee dog, I am aware that this photograph has, in the last ten years, become the popular image – probably because it is more decorative than the other photographs and paintings.¹ I should, however, express a doubt or question of the truth of the photograph's identity. The main difference between this photograph and the other images of the dog is that he looks a little more kempt and his ears are up rather than down. The caption is written in a contemporary hand – so the dog was alive at the time it was written. Given the popularity of Greyfriars' Bobby in his lifetime it is not by any means unreasonable that a professional photographer would lure him into his studio and brush him to look a little more elegant. But the photograph and its inscription may very simply be evidence of Bobby's popularity, which is, in itself, an extraordinary fact of Edinburgh's history and deserves analysis.

The factual story of Greyfriars' Bobby is simple enough. It is published by Forbes Macgregor in his book *Greyfriars Bobby: The Real Story at Last*.² It should be said that even in this work, the 'real story' is presented fictionally – the facts are not sufficient to make this narrative, and the story is presented with the facts inserted into a tale with recorded speech.

According to Macgregor's research, Bobby's master, John Gray, came into the city originally looking for employment as a gardener and found work as a policeman; his Skye terrier was, therefore, a rather small police dog. Gray died in February 1858. The dog lived substantially in Greyfriars' Churchyard until his own death in 1872. At some point in the 1860s, he developed the habit of leaving every lunchtime at the sound of the one o'clock gun,

to eat at the local eating house. He became a familiar and much admired tourist attraction.

A brief scan of the shelves of the nearest bookshop produces five books in print on Greyfriars' Bobby – he would appear to be Edinburgh's most famous son. Reading the literature, the question of whether the photograph shows the right dog is interestingly overshadowed by a further question; why was he so popular? Why did he evoke such public admiration? Why did I meet tourists on George IV Bridge last summer, searching for his monument, who were thoroughly disconcerted to find how *small* it is? (I have an idea that local archaeologists of the future excavating the Scott Monument could easily misread the sculpture of Scott with his dog, Maida, to fit a heroic legend of Greyfriars' Bobby.)

The loyalty and love of a dog for a human is a recurring and simply touching reality. There is a parallel case told by the painter, David Octavius Hill, on the occasion of Sir William Allan's death in 1850. On the way to the funeral, one of the executors³

told a little circumstance which affected us all – Do you remember Allan's little Skye Terrier, Dandy, which he has had for about ten years – and was so fond of. Dandy – who was rather a shy fellow to strangers was a great friend of mine – and was ready ever to give such a welcome as he could express by snuffing about me and licking my face when I submitted to such endearments. His kindhearted master used to be delighted with these manifestations of his hospitality. Well this poor little doggie when his master died went down stairs and could never after be persuaded to take a particle of food – and on the morning of the funeral gave the true pledge of heartbreak and sorrow by dying. This is one of those little incidents with which Allan if he had been alive would have been most affected by. And indeed those having great hearted little ruffians as a friend of mine calls the generation of Scotch Terriers own a very curious and somewhat mysterious sort of people. Poor Dandy has I understand been buried in the garden behind the house in Great King Street.

The friend Hill refers to in this passage was Dr John Brown, who became a best-selling author on publishing a small book called *Rab and his Friends* in 1859. Rab was a carter's dog, 'a huge mastiff, sauntering down the middle of the causeway, as if with his hands in his pockets: he is old, grey, brindled, as big as a little Highland bull, and has the Shakespearean dewlaps shaking as he goes'.⁴ Brown first encountered him when he was a boy in the 1820s as a result of pursuing a dog fight, which started with a bull terrier attacking a sheepdog – when that fight was broken up with snuff, the bull terrier rushed off and attacked the mastiff's muzzle.⁵

One sudden jerk of that enormous head, a sort of dirty mist about his mouth, no noise, – and the bright and fierce little fellow is dropped, limp, and dead. A solemn pause: this was more than any of us had bargained for ... Bob and I buried the Game Chicken [the bull terrier] that night (we had not much of a tea) in the back-green of his house, in Melville Street, No. 17, with considerable gravity and silence; and being at the time in the Iliad, and, like all boys, Trojans, we called him Hector of course.

John Brown knew the mastiff for years after: 'I found the way to his heart by frequent scratching of his huge head, and an occasional bone'.⁶

As a young man, Brown became a medical student. The story then becomes the story of Rab's 'friends' the carter and his wife. The carter brings his wife into Minto House Hospital with a growth in her breast. She is described in heroic terms as calm, firm and even beautiful in her control of suffering. She undergoes an operation in the operating theatre surrounded by students with her husband *and* the dog present. This was before the discovery of chloroform or the principle of antiseptis. After the operation,⁷

she is dressed, steps gently and decently down from the table, looks for James; then turning to the surgeon and the students, she curtsies, – and, in a low, clear voice, begs their pardon if she has behaved ill. The students – all of us – wept like children: the

surgeon hopped her up carefully, – and, resting on James and me, Ailie went to her room, Rab following.

Briefly (this is a harrowing story), after a few optimistic days, Ailie is attacked by infection and fever and, despite devoted nursing by her husband, dies. He leaves the dog guarding her body, fetches his cart from Howgate and carries her home. The carter then himself takes ill and dies. The dog goes to ground in the mare's stall, refuses to eat or let the mare be fed and is eventually killed by a neighbour: 'Fit end for Rab, quick and complete. His teeth and his friends gone, why should he keep the peace, and be civil?'⁸

The story is particularly interesting, not because it is told from the dog's point of view, but because it is told from the point of view of the man, wife and dog as a family or society – how they interrelate and how they depend upon each other; Ailie's death is fatal to the whole little society. But the dog is not simply an echo of the humans; he is an independent character and his reactions are distinctively a dog's.

It was not a merely literary idea.⁹ The Brown family seem to have lived with dogs precisely in that manner. He wrote a series of character studies in the essay 'Our Dogs', which describes them as heroic individuals. As an example, the bull terrier, Wasp,¹⁰

could do everything it became a dog to do, from killing an otter or a pole cat, to watching and playing with a baby, and was as docile to her master as she was surly to all else ... Once when she had three pups, one of them died. For two days and nights she gave herself up to trying to bring it to life – licking it, and turning it over and over, growling over it, and all but worrying it to awake it. She paid no attention to the living two, and gave them no milk, flung them away with her teeth, and would have killed them, had they been allowed to remain with her. She was as one possessed, and neither ate, nor drank, nor slept, was heavy and miserable with her milk, and in such a state of excitement that no one could remove the dead pup.

Early on the third day she was seen to take the pup in her mouth, and start across the fields towards the Tweed, striding like a race-horse – she plunged in, holding up her burden, and at the middle of the stream dropped it, and swam swiftly ashore: then she stood and watched the little dark lump floating away, bobbing up and down with the current, and losing it at last far down, she made her way home, sought out the living two, devoured them with her love, carried them one by one to her lair, and gave herself wholly up to nurse: you can fancy her mental and bodily happiness and relief when they were pulling away – and theirs.

There is a Romantic, Georgian, melodramatic and even operatic (he compared Wasp to an operatic heroine) character to John Brown's stories. He clearly thought of dogs as independent and, indeed, as noble savages. For him, they were an expression of that essential loss of noble simplicity and morality which is inherent in the sophistication and control of city life. It was his view that they were not subject to the human rules of 'civilisation' and could live simpler and grander lives than us within the confines of the city.¹¹ The story of *Rab and his Friends* is a tragedy, uncomplicated and undiluted.

It is presumably not a coincidence that Brown's book was published a year after the death of John Gray, Bobby's master, in February 1858, and that Brown's book was a best-seller in the fourteen years the dog lived. In an over-civilised world in which people, and indeed their dogs, are crowded together and need to behave in a constrained fashion, the idea of an independent dog, a heroic dog, had a particular charm. It seems very likely that people looked at Bobby and thought of Brown's stories, investing the living dog with some of their heroic excitement. Bobby's story is not, as the story of Rab or the story of William Allan's Dandy, a tale of canine self-sacrifice – their grief was fatal. It was, viewed sympathetically, a story of loyalty and constancy – but given the dog's regular lunch break, a *bearably* touching story, loyalty blended with a human practicality.

The little dog's popularity was based on a human idea – possibly aided by a calculation on the part of the owner of the eating house who fed him, but refused to own him. Sir William Chambers, the Lord Provost, paid his licence fee, but we are still left with that agreeable idea. He was not just a sentimental focus, a small hairy perambulant tourist attraction, but a public realisation of John Brown's idea of the Independent Dog, raised by his virtue to a Freedom of the City.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Illustrated (from the print in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery) in Forbes Macgregor, *Greyfriars Bobby: The Real Story at Last* (Edinburgh 1990). A painting by John McLeod, 1867, hangs in Greyfriars' Church.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Letter from David Octavius Hill to David Roberts, 3 March 1850, National Library of Scotland, MS Acc 7723.
4. Dr John Brown, *Rab and his Friends* (Edinburgh, undated edition, first published 1859), p. 18.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
9. John Brown first discussed this in a critical review of Sir David Wilkie's painting 'Distraint for Rent', where he described, with loving attention, the reaction of the sheepdog crouched under the chair: Review of the Royal Scottish Academy's exhibition in *The Witness*, March 1846.
10. John Brown, 'Our Dogs', *Horae Subsecivae* (second series, London 1908), pp. 199–201.
11. We, in our yet more crowded and comfortable world, have transferred this idea of wild independence to the smaller and less dangerous cat, which is 'licensed by its nature' to fight other cats and kill birds.