Walter Edwin Peck, ‘Shelley in Edinburgh’,
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, Original Series, 11 (1922), pp. 75-85.

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SHELLEY IN EDINBURGH

IT is a singular fact that Shelley, born the son of a country gentleman of Sussex, educated at Eton and Oxford, and passing most of his days in the more moderate climate of the south of England and Italy, should have been induced twice within the brief compass of his life to make the journey of more than two days by coach to Edinburgh, the cold capital of the north. The poet whose 'little round head'[1] was never more comfortable than when roasting before a blazing fire, and who wrote *The Cenci* on the roof of an Italian villa, under a blistering sun whose light and heat were 'intolerable to every other'[2] person thereabouts—this poet could not have selected Edinburgh for reasons of climate. Why, then, did he go to Edinburgh?

By 1811 Shelley had fallen under the spell of Godwin's teaching concerning the iniquity of the institution of marriage and the superiority of untrammelled love. Always eager to proselyte others, he undertook to convert his sisters and their schoolfellow, Harriet Westbrook, to his views. For a time Elizabeth Shelley promised well as a noviciate, but eventually proved a backslider. Harriet Westbrook's championship of this and other radical doctrines imbibed from Shelley brought her into collision with the authorities of the school at Clapham Common, which she and the Shelley sisters were attending. Nor were

[1] Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, i. 77.

[2] Mary W. Shelley, Note on 'The Cenci,' in *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1839), ii. 275-6.

such unorthodox teachings more favourably received by Harriet's father, John Westbrook. Therefore Harriet, 'persecuted' (Shelleyan for *opposed*) by 'bigots' in school and home, must not remain within reach of her 'tormentors.' Fly with Shelley, her rescuing knight, she must; but how, and whither?

Shelley's Oxford friend, Hogg, had taken issue with his anti-marriage views, and as the result of an interchange of letters between the youths Shelley's citadel of Reason was somewhat shaken. 'The ties of love and honour' might be 'of sufficient strength to bind congenial souls,' but 'the arguments of impracticability, and . . . the disproportionate sacrifice which the female is called upon to make,'[1] won Shelley over to the observance of law on this point; and so, 'having agreed on a point of, in their eyes, so trifling importance,'[2] Harriet and he cast about for a clergyman to perform the rite which, as it seemed to them, had gained such unwarranted prestige from custom.

Now arose a difficulty. Neither bride nor groom was of legal age in England; they could not be married there. The laws of Ireland or Scotland might prove less strict. They would investigate at first hand. In the grey of an August dawn[3] they took a hackney coach in London to the Bull and Mouth Tavern in Bull and Mouth Street, whence the northern mail coach would proceed via York and Berwick. Embarked on the mail that evening, they met a persuasive young Scottish advocate, who probably determined them to go to Edinburgh. Hogg says that this lawyer 'told them how to get married';[4] and he may also have directed Shelley to a suite of large, comfortable ground-floor rooms kept by one William Cumming,

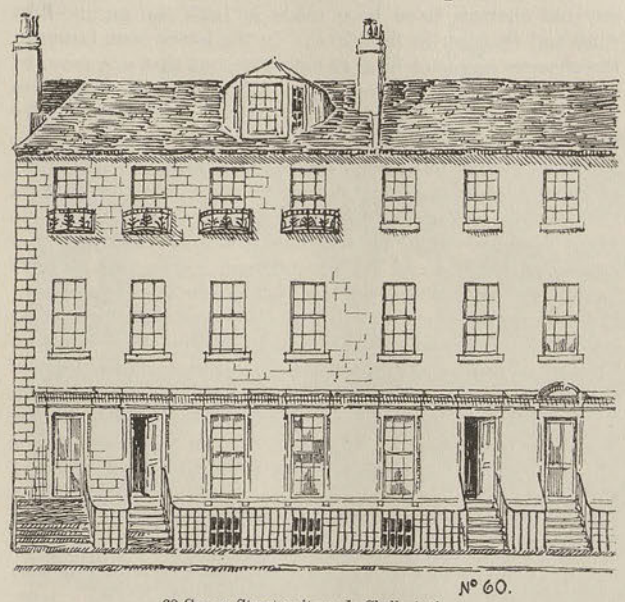
[1] Letter of Shelley to Hogg, from London, 15th August 1811, published by Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, i. 417-18.

[2] *St. Irvyne*, ch. xii.

[3] Saturday, 24th August, or Sunday, 25th August. The exact date is not known.

[4] Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* i. 452.

hostler,[1] at 60 George Street. On this fine new street, commanding at its intersections unforgettable panoramas of the



60 George Street as it was in Shelley's time.

city, sloping downward to the sea, they established themselves with such baggage as they had brought with them.

The house in which they tarried is still to be seen; but its

[1] *The Post Office Annual Directory*, from Whitsunday 1811 to Whitsunday 1812 (Edinburgh, 1811), p. 61: 'Cumming, William, furnished lodgings, 60, George Street.' The same directory for 1816-17, published in 1816, has this entry at p. 62: 'Cumming, William, furnished lodgings, 13, George Street.' Shelley and Harriet arrived in Edinburgh on the morning of Tuesday, 27th August, or Wednesday morning, 28th August.

exterior has been altered by the addition of an extra storey and the conversion of Shelley's rooms into a shop;[1] and internal changes have been made in both the ground-floor suite and that on the first floor. In the latter case, however, the changes have not been so extensive but that one may, by making a survey of the rooms,[2] obtain a fairly accurate idea of what the rooms corresponding to them on the ground floor must have been like in Shelley's day. But though I was able to see both these suites when visiting Edinburgh in the summer of 1920, I was not so fortunate with respect to the suite on the second floor, which in 1811 was the top suite, and which Hogg occupied while he still held the full confidence and esteem of Shelley and Harriet. Hogg, who seems to have been a rather exacting person, found the lodgings 'good,' the charges 'reasonable,' the meals 'abundant' and 'excellent'[3] at 60 George Street; but he complained of an inefficient servant, a hard mattress, and the echoing thunders of the hall and stairway. In view of the last annoyance, indeed, he decided that he had been fated 'to lodge with Jupiter Tonans at the top of Olympus.'[4] The only annoyance Shelley suffered, apparently, was from the shrill voice of Christie, the maid; and, of course, as soon as Hogg and Harriet discovered this fact, they took a perverse delight in drawing the girl into conversation in Shelley's presence.

From the hostler's lodgings Shelley and Harriet probably proceeded to the house of the Reverend Joseph Robertson, then pastor of Leith Wynd Chapel, one of the smaller churches described as 'connected with the establishment'[5] in Edinburgh. Robertson was living at this time at 225, The Canongate,[6]

[1] Now occupied by R. McDowell and Sons bakers and confectioners.

[2] Now occupied by I. Lusman, furrier.

[3] Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, i. 440.

[4] *Ibid.*, i. 438.

[5] Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiæ Scoticanæ*. Edinburgh, MDCCCLXVI. Part I., p. 90.

[6] *Post Office Annual Directory*, 1811, p. 213. The same directory for 1809-10, p. 210, gives Robertson's address as 'opposite St. John Street, Canongate.' (This might have been 225 Canongate.) The Directory for 1816-17, p. 223, gives another address

BIG JACK'S CLOSE

in the five-storey tenement at the side of which access may be had to Big Jack's Close. 'On the north side of the Canongate, opposite to St. John Street, a large and lofty stone tenement bears the name of Jack's Land, where the lovely Susannah, Countess of Eglinton, resided during her latter years, and was visited by Lady Jane Douglas, as appears in the evidence of the Douglas cause. The other tenants of its numerous flats were doubtless of corresponding importance in the social scale; but its most eminent occupant was David Hume, who removed thither in 1753, while engaged in writing his *History of England*, and continued to reside at Jack's Land during the most important period of his literary career.'[1] 'Jack's Land' appears to have been the property at 225, The Canongate. If this is so, it was a curious chance indeed that brought the young devotee of Hume to be married in the house already connected with so important a work of that writer as the *History of England*.

One can imagine the ardent Shelley explaining his desires to Robertson, urging the necessity of an immediate marriage, and perhaps enforcing his demands by assurances of a generous *pourboire* for the none too scrupulous clergyman. Under the laws of the Scottish Church, no minister might marry a couple unless the bride had been resident in the parish or county for a period of six weeks preceding the event, and then only after due proclamation of banns in churches of the city on three successive Sabbaths.[2] But Shelley and Harriet had barely arrived in Edinburgh, and there had been no time for such repeated proclamation of banns. What was to be done? Somehow, a certificate attesting six weeks' residence in Edinburgh by Harriet, and previous proclamation of banns 'in several churches in this city' was procured, bearing the signature of J[ohn] Fettes, District Session Clerk, and certified

for Robertson: '13, Carrubber's Close.' He was residing in this street at the time of his arraignment and trial in the following year.

[1] *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, ii. 70.

[2] Act 8, Assembly 1784; and Act of Parliament, Charles II., 1661, chap. xxxiv.

by Patrick Murray, teacher, and William Cumming, hostler.[1] The ceremony of marriage was then performed by Robertson, and the certificate endorsed in his hand: 'The within designed Parties were married before Witnesses by me, Joseph Robertson, Minister.' An entry recording the declaration of banns and Harriet's six weeks' residence was then made in practical duplicate of the certificate already described, in the small quarto record book of the session clerk of the City Parish, and this was certified by Cumming, Murray, and Shelley himself.[2] The entry in the record book is of August 1811, but does not fix the precise date. The original certificate is dated 'August 28, 1811.' But in the allegation filed by Shelley in 1814,[3] on the occasion of his remarriage with Harriet, 'the twenty-ninth day of August, one thousand eight hundred and eleven,' is set down as the time at which the first ceremony was performed.

Perhaps (but the fact that the young Scottish advocate directed Shelley at once to Robertson, I think, indicates the contrary) this clandestine marriage was Robertson's first offence. If so, it was not his last. For seven years later he was arraigned, tried by the High Court of Justiciary, and found guilty of having celebrated two other such marriages in the autumn of 1817. With an accomplice, he was banished from Scotland,[4] and demitted and deposed by the Church.[5]

[1] Ingpen, *Shelley in England*, 1917, pp. 309-10. Fettes was the proprietor of a boot and shoe shop at 56 Leith Street in 1811.

[2] The document was first published by an anonymous writer in *Chambers's Journal*, sixth series, vol. iii. p. 274.

[3] Ingpen, *Shelley in England*, p. 422.

[4] The original documents are in the archives of the High Court of Justiciary, where a running narrative of Robertson's trial may be read in Journal E. 9, volume covering cases from 16th July 1817 to 15th June 1818. The pages of the Journal are not numbered, but the Robertson case begins at the page dated '2nd March 1818.' An account of the trial appeared in the *Scotsman*, vol. ii., No. 61, p. 93 (Saturday, 21st March 1818), under the heading: 'High Court of Justiciary.'

[5] *Fasti Ecclesiæ Scoticanæ*, Part I., p. 90. In a new edition of Scott's book (1915), the data on Robertson are more detailed.

Shelley seems to have had early misgivings as to the validity of their Scottish union. On 21st October 1811, he wrote to his kinsman, Thomas C. Medwin: 'In the course of three weeks or a month, I shall take the precaution of being remarried.' Mr. W. M. Rossetti has stated that in August 1813, Shelley having attained his majority, 'his first act was to marry Harriet over again in an Episcopal chapel in Edinburgh.' The information, Mr. Rossetti declared, came from 'an informant exceedingly unlikely to be mistaken.'[1] Yet no proof of such a marriage is forthcoming, and it is almost wholly discredited by the known remarriage, which, as a result of negotiations with money-lenders, and consideration of the effect which a faulty marriage ceremony might have upon the disposition of the Shelley estates, occurred on 24th March 1814, at St. George's Church, Hanover Square, London.

What was the nature of the city in which they spent their honeymoon? Baedeker's statement that Edinburgh is 'the most romantically beautiful city in Europe,' true as it is to-day, when the development of modern industry has introduced so much smoke and grime into the city as would set Ruskin weeping afresh to behold it, causes us to wonder how much more beautiful it must have been in Shelley's day, when a great part of the district in which he and Harriet resided was yet but sparsely settled and offered easy escape for long walks into the open country northward to the Forth, or eastward to Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat, or southward by way of the Meadows to the Blackford, the Braid, and the still more glorious Pentland Hills. Shelley, who had been passionately fond of cross-country walks in the quieter and less varied scenery of Oxfordshire, would have revelled in long tramps here; and when not occupied with voluminous correspondence, or reading, or adventurings into the society of Edinburgh, must often have indulged this pleasure. Hogg's evidence on this point is confusing. He barely finishes pro-

[1] Dowden, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1886, i. 393.

testing that Shelley would not join him in 'pedestrian excursions from Edinburgh' when he says that daily 'after dinner, we all went forth together, to take as long a walk as could be brought within the compass of an afternoon.'[1] Probably he meant to say that Shelley (who did not wish to leave Harriet alone at this time) would not join him on one of those long rambles lasting several days, and covering several counties, which he digresses to describe in his *Life of Shelley* whenever the fancy strikes him, and whether Shelley happened to take the ramble or not.

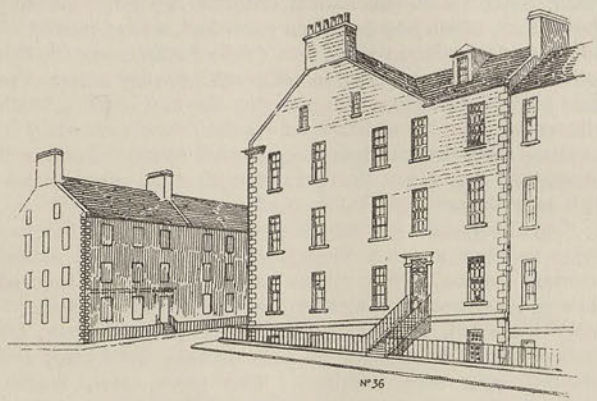
But to all the natural beauty of scenery in and about Edinburgh I fail to find one certain word of reference in the poetry of that period; nor have any later passages been definitely connected with sights seen on this occasion. This may at first seem strange; but a careful reading of his early novels and the later *Queen Mab*, to speak only of the first period of his authorship, will show that he was drawing more heavily upon descriptions of other writers, and upon imagined scenery, than upon his own first-hand impressions of travel. By the time *Alastor* and the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* appeared, in 1816 and 1817 respectively, his method had altered; yet even in *Alastor* he owes no slight debt to Wordsworth and to Southey.

By the first of October, Hogg, who had joined bride and groom in Edinburgh at the beginning of the previous month, found it necessary to return to conveyancers' chambers at York. Thither Shelley and Harriet accompanied him, the party travelling by post-chaise, and spending the first night at Belford, the second at Darlington, and arriving at York on the third day (probably 3rd October, on the evening of which day Shelley addressed a letter to his father from his new lodgings at York). Not until two years had passed over all their heads did Shelley and Harriet again see Edinburgh.

On this second visit Hogg was not of the party, but 'the

[1] Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, i. 463-4.

laughing philosopher,' Thomas Love Peacock, had his place. This time the trip was made by Warwick and Keswick in the private coach which Shelley had purchased, a few months before, from a London coachmaker, for some five hundred pounds,[1] and which arrived in Edinburgh at length, about the middle of October 1813, in need of extensive repairs.[2] On



36 Frederick Street as it was in Shelley's time. A new building has been erected on the site.

From a drawing by T. P. Marwick, Esq., Architect.

reaching the Scottish capital again, I think it likely that the party proceeded first to their former address, but, failing to find suitable rooms with their old landlord, went around the corner of George Street to 36 Frederick Street, where an Alexander Laing[3] provided them with lodgings. They had come to Edinburgh to gain peace of mind in remoteness from Shelley's numerous creditors. 'We think of remaining here

[1] Ingpen, *Shelley in England*, p. 638.
[2] *Ibid.*, 636-7.
[3] *Post Office Directory* for 1812-13, p. 140; 1813-14, p. 144.

all this winter,' Harriet wrote Mrs. Nugent; and she praised Edinburgh by saying: 'This City is, I think, much the best. The people here are not so intolerant as they are in London. Literature stands on a higher footing here than anywhere else.' [1]

As if in proof of Harriet's statement, there came to them a young Brazilian student named Baptista, who, encountering *Queen Mab*, which had just been published, was so moved by it that he determined to translate it into Portuguese. To this end he formed an acquaintanceship with Shelley; and even after Shelley withdrew from the city the two kept in touch with each other through letters. Later, they met again in London. But the translation begun with so much fervour of admiration was never finished; for Baptista was stricken with lung-disease, and died soon after.

Something—the bracing air, perhaps, of Edinburgh—seems to have spurred Shelley, on both visits, to almost incessant reading. Hogg relates how Shelley in 1811 brought 'lots of good books' [2] to their lodgings in George Street—books borrowed, Hogg believed, from a public library, for Shelley carried them away as soon as they were read, and returned with other volumes. Two years later, Shelley wrote to Hogg, from Edinburgh: 'I have for some time given myself to study'; and he then enumerated, among the authors he had recently read, Plutarch and Homer, Tacitus and Cicero, Laplace and Hume. Of Plutarch's two essays, *On Sarcophagi*, he says: 'I intend to comment upon them, and to reason in my preface concerning the Orphic and Pythagoric system of diet.' [3] From this sentence we know that the *Refutation of Deism* was projected, and perhaps in part written, while Shelley was on the second visit to Edinburgh.

[1] *Letters from Harriet Shelley to Catherine Nugent*, 1889, p. 50.
[2] Hogg, *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, i. 454.
[3] *Ibid.*, ii. 482.

'A little more than two years has passed since I made my first visit here to be united to Mr. Shelley. To me they have been the happiest and longest years of my life.' [1] So wrote Harriet to Mrs. Nugent on the 20th October. Yet Jane, Lady Shelley, has recorded that 'Towards the close of 1813, estrangements, which for some time had been slowly growing between Mr. and Mrs. Shelley, came to a crisis.' [2] Did the rift in the lute make its appearance while they were in Edinburgh? Certainly Harriet's declarations (just quoted) are against the supposition that dissensions had arisen before 20th October; and a letter, postmarked 23rd November, to the same correspondent [3] furnishes no hint of unhappiness. From this meagre but tangible evidence, it seems probable that prior to the return to London,[4] which now became imperative because of the illness of Timothy Shelley, there had been no serious break between Shelley and Harriet; and that it was the fate of Edinburgh, from first to last, to bound the full cycle of their happiness.[5]

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[1] *Letters from Harriet Shelley to Catherine Nugent*, p. 49.
[2] *Shelley Memorials*, 1859, pp. 64-5.
[3] *Letters from Harriet Shelley to Catherine Nugent*, pp. 51-3.
[4] Probably in the private carriage which had carried them northward, and which John Dumbreck, the Edinburgh coachmaker, in the meantime had repaired, the Shelleys proceeded to London and reached the latter city on or before 10th December. Neither their route, nor the precise dates of their departure and arrival, are at present known.
[5] I have not thought it necessary to enter into a discussion of Hogg's 'love' for Harriet Shelley, which (we learn from Shelley's letter to Miss Hitchener, 14th November 1811) was the sequel of his meeting Harriet at Edinburgh in September, and which ended in the disgraceful proposals made to Harriet in Shelley's absence, at York in October; for so long as the Shelleys and Hogg remained in Edinburgh, there was at least no open disclosure of Hogg's perfidy.