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# THE WAR OF WORDS – THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BEACON NEWSPAPER

JOHN CHALMERS

*Now is the stately column broke,  
The beacon-light is quenched in smoke*

Walter Scott, *Marmion* Canto I introduction

The early eighteenth century was a period of intense political unrest in Britain. The all powerful Tories, fearful that the revolutionary events in France might spread to Britain, fiercely attempted to suppress the burgeoning Whigs who were clamouring for a wider electorate and for the removal of corrupt practices of electing members of parliament. The unrest was fostered in newspapers, journals and broadsheets of the time, and nowhere with a greater intensity than in Edinburgh.

## EDINBURGH'S PUBLICATIONS WITH A POLITICAL BIAS

The quarterly *Edinburgh Review* was founded in 1802, by Sydney Smith, Henry Brougham and Francis Horner, with Francis Jeffrey its editor for twenty-six years. The *Review*, a Whig-orientated quarterly magazine of literary and political criticism, became enormously successful with a circulation of over 13,000 throughout the English speaking world. The *Review* was counterbalanced by the appearance in 1817 of the Tory *Blackwood's Magazine* which was founded by 'a considerable body of rebels to the long undisputed tyrannical sway of Mr Jeffrey and his friends; and it was necessary that the sentiments of this class should find some vehicle of convenient expression'.<sup>1</sup> *Blackwood's*, a monthly, had John Wilson (writing under the pen name of Christopher North), Walter Scott's son-in-law John Gibson Lockhart, and James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd,

among its main contributors. Like its rival the *Review*, it developed a wide readership.

1817 also saw the founding of the weekly newspaper, the *Scotsman*, published in support of the liberal reforming cause, so that there were now two Whig orientated publications versus one with Tory leanings. Adam Black, the publisher, wrote:

The year 1817 was memorable for Edinburgh as that which saw the birth of the two chief organs of public opinion it has produced after the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Scotsman* and *Blackwood's Magazine*. Each was hailed by the party it represented as a refreshing novelty and a wholesome power, denounced by the opposite side as an engine of mischief and an offence to all the right minded. The struggle between the dominant but waning [Tories], and the young but growing powers [Whigs], was gradually reaching a crisis and the passions of the combatants became more intense as it drew near. The bitterness of animosity displayed in those days is repulsive now to look back on and difficult to realise (...) the party represented by *Blackwood's Magazine* was most to blame. They had more wit on their side but also more venom.<sup>2</sup> (Black was a leading Whig!)

The success of the *Scotsman* prompted the following reaction:

The *Scotsman* (...) professedly attached to the Whig, or Opposition interest, had for some time been established in this city, and the keenness with which it was sought for, and the extensive circulation it had consequently obtained, created so great an alarm in the minds of the leaders of the Tory or Ministerial party, that it was determined in order to avert the consequences dreaded from the uncontrolled circulation of the principles it disseminated, to commence a publication decidedly supporting the other side of the question.<sup>3</sup>

Prominent among the Tory leaders seeking a counterbalance to the *Scotsman* was Walter Scott. He discussed his ideas in a letter to Lord Melville<sup>4</sup> dated 24 November, 1819.<sup>5</sup> In it he refers to a letter from

John Wilson Croker<sup>6</sup> who had written; ‘Some literary Gentlemen have determined to set up a weekly paper on principles diametrically opposite to the weekly journals which are now in vogue, that is principles of morality, loyalty, respect for constituted authorities, & in short, *Toryism*.’ Croker had written a letter to Lockhart on 18 November asking whether he or his companion contributor to *Blackwood’s Magazine*, John Wilson, would be prepared to contribute to the proposed paper. ‘...much of the effect of such a paper will depend on the contributors being unknown, the secret of your name shall be carefully preserved.’<sup>7</sup> Scott endorsed the idea and suggested the name of *Beacon*. He anticipated the problem of finding a good editor<sup>8</sup> but felt that there would be no difficulty in raising funds ‘but not without exposing our persons & our plans and it is astonishing what secrecy does in a matter of this kind’. In the event these predictions proved remarkably accurate. The emphasis of both Croker and Scott on the importance of concealing the names of the contributors can only be interpreted as anticipating that the contributions might be of a libellous character. Only by being anonymous could the authors be as rancorous and outspoken as the proposers hoped.

In discussions between Scott, Lockhart and Sir William Rae<sup>9</sup>, several names were suggested for the role of editor. They seemed odd choices, for mostly they were men who were in full employment, and it seemed presumptuous to think that they might be tempted. James Murray was an editor of the *London Times*; James Ballantyne (Scott’s ‘fat friend’ and his printer) was already editor and proprietor of the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal*, and John Wilson was the principle contributor to *Blackwood’s Magazine* and Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. All declined. Perhaps the most remarkable proposal was the American author and historian Washington Irving, who at that time was resident in Britain, struggling to make a living. Scott, who had met Irving and had a high regard for his writings, sent him a letter:

You have not only the talents necessary for making a figure in literature ... and want nothing but a sphere of action in which to exercise them (...) Would you have any objection to superintend an Anti-Jacobin periodical publication which will appear weekly in Edinburgh, supported by the most respectable talent, (...) The appointment of the editor (for which ample funds are provided) will be £500 a year certain, with the reasonable prospect of further advantages ... One

thing I may hint, that some of your coadjutors being young and clever men, may need a bridle rather than a spur.<sup>10</sup>

Although chronically short of funds, Irving rejected this most generous offer, worth in today’s values about £80,000. He replied to Scott ‘I am peculiarly unfitted for the post proposed. I have no strong political prejudices...my whole course of life has been desultory, and I am unfitted for any periodically recurrent task’.<sup>11</sup> The style and fortune of the paper might have been radically different had he accepted. Whether Scott could have raised these ‘ample funds’ is doubtful but he was right in believing that the success of the paper would depend on the quality of the editor.

#### THE LAUNCH OF THE *BEACON*

Fifteen anonymous backers, all prominent Tory figures, provided financial backing and the *Beacon* was launched in Edinburgh on 6 January, 1821. No experienced and responsible editor had been secured. A number of young lawyers contributed ‘the rude drollery of ... young hot-bloods’.<sup>12</sup>

The *Beacon’s* prospectus read:

This paper aspires to a place in the public favour, which in this city is wholly unoccupied. It appears as the Champion of our Civil Rights, and of the Government under which we enjoy them. It claims the honourable distinction of maintaining the Causes of Social Order, with the zeal which has hitherto belonged entirely to its enemies ... No privilege worth preserving was ever maintained without a contest. We must defend our rights like men who value them. We must repel the dangers by which they are threatened, with the energy which has distinguished our opponents ... the evils of the Free Press can only be corrected by the wise use of its advantages.

Newspapers in the early nineteenth century were slender publications of four to eight pages, usually published weekly and distributed by hand or posted to enrolled subscribers. They were not sold in shops. The government stamp duty on newspapers was increased to four pence a copy in 1815, making them relatively expensive and affordable only to the wealthy. The poor had to make do with broadsheets which were issued whenever a particularly interesting local event such as a murder, duel, execution or criminal trial occurred. These were distributed by street criers

# THE BEACON

REMOVE NOT THE ANCIENT LAND MARK, WHICH THY FATHERS HAVE SET.—PROVERBS XXII. 25.

No. 8. VOL. I.

EDINBURGH, SATURDAY, JANUARY 20, 1821.

Price 10d.

## COUNTY MEETINGS.

It is one of "the signs of the times," that every public declaration of sentiment or opinion from the friends of the present political system, is regarded by the Whigs as a proper object of the most intemperate and unmeasured invective. The proceeding is represented as mean and servile, and its authors are denounced as the profligate hirelings of a party. This violence of reproach seems to follow almost as a necessary consequence of such measures, and is seldom regulated by any regard to the character of those with whom they originate. Where a difference of political principle is thus avowed, every other offence is easily presumed by that eager and unreflecting animosity which first imputes corrupt views, and then searches for corrupt motives.

This cannot be so well illustrated as by the conduct of these persons with regard to the county meetings which have every where of late expressed their senti-

of the safety of these vague and indefinite calumnies which admit only of a general denial. In the present case, this is the only species of detraction that has been ventured on; and never was there a juster inference than that which has been generally formed concerning the character of the traducers, from the means of detraction which they have thus been forced to employ. Against such imputations, the persons against whom they have been directed are defended by almost every circumstance which excludes suspicion of unworthy motives. Very few indeed, (probably not above a twentieth part) of the members of the county meetings in this country have received the favours of government, or can be supposed to be actuated by the hope of them. It would be useless to look for any class of persons which is placed entirely beyond the sphere of ministerial influence; but surely the character and situation of landed proprietors afford the very best security against it. As to the follies which have been lately uttered concerning the possibility of

nified reproof, as at once illustrates the political integrity of these assemblies, and explains the extraordinary animosity with which the Whigs seem at present to regard them. We are not surprised that these persons should thus have taken advantage of such an opportunity to prosecute their interested designs, for these are perhaps the only meetings to which they have access, whose decisions possess that authority which is given by a fair opposition of opinion. On every other public occasion they have incurred the ineffable ridicule of assembling their own adherents to decide on the fate of their adversaries—of making long speeches where there was nobody to convince—and of exulting in a preconcerted and preposterous unanimity.

But what shall we say of their attempt to alter the nature of these meetings—to introduce into them persons whose only recommendation consists in a blind attachment to their own principles? Or in what language shall we reprobate their conduct on the

Figs 1 & 2 The title of the Beacon and the newspaper tax stamp which represented 40% of the paper's cost. National Library of Scotland

and cost a half penny or a penny. When the stamp duty was reduced to one penny in 1836 and finally abolished in 1855, it became financially possible to issue newspapers on a daily basis to a wider public. The *Scotsman* for example became a daily in that year.

The printer of a local newspaper was often the proprietor, publisher and sometimes the editor and chief reporter. The proprietor, printer and publisher of the *Beacon* was Duncan Stevenson, the owner of a successful printing firm in Edinburgh. It was published every Saturday as an eight page paper and rapidly achieved 800 subscribers despite costing ten pence a copy (of which fourpence was the stamp duty). The paper took the usual form of a contemporary weekly newspaper. The front page contained an editorial, usually criticising some aspect of the Whig cause. Inside there were reports from various countries (copied from foreign papers) and from London and other parts of Britain. When Parliament was in session the proceedings were detailed at length. Items of local news were reported, especially if they were critical

NAPLES.


" December 27.

" On the 25th, a military council was convened, under the presidency of his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. On the same evening General William Pepe set off for the province of Abruzzo, to join the third division under his command. The sacred squadron, under the orders of the brave Morillo, forms part of this division.

" The works upon all the points susceptible of being fortified are nearly completed. Gaete has been entrusted to its illustrious defender, Beganni, and Colonel Pepe (deputy) has been appointed to Civitella. A junta of generals, under the presidency of the Regent, is now forming, to resolve promptly upon every thing which relates to the defence of the kingdom. The plan of this defence, agreed upon under the ministry of General Carrascosa, has received no modification whatever; the Royal Guard will form part of the fourth division, which will remain in reserve in the city of Naples and its vicinity. The first and second division, commanded, the former by General Arco-vito, the latter by D'Ambrosio, have taken their positions.

" Thus all is ready for defence, though nothing announces that we shall be attacked. The Austrian forces continue in their lines on the other side of the Po, and their number does not exceed 80,000 strong. Every thing presages that the explanations which will be given by our King will avert the scourge of war with which we are menaced; but if it should be otherwise, we repeat it, we are ready to defend ourselves; and the national feeling, so forcibly dwelt upon in our public debates, will also triumph in the field of battle.

" Many foreign military men at Turin, Milan, London, and Paris, have with eagerness dispatched plans and observations, in which are indicated the means of defending our territory with success. Amongst these plans is one by the



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of prominent Whigs. The local Whig press was castigated, particularly the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Scotsman*. Correspondence, invariably selected for its political bias, was published under pseudonyms, and many poems or songs were printed, mostly of a very puerile character and mostly mocking prominent Whigs identified by the first and last letters of their name or by a nickname, coined by the paper, which would be easily recognised by the readers of the day. Thus James Stuart was represented as S....t or as the *Ox*. The last page contained market reports, announcements of births, marriages and deaths, and advertisements, which became progressively fewer as the reputation of the paper declined.

Occasionally the tedium of the constant political harangue was leavened by items of a more general interest such as reports from the Arctic voyages of Captain Parry in the *Discovery*, including, for instance, the method of growing mustard and cress aboard ship for the prevention of scurvy. The time occupying practice of taking snuff was commented upon:

Every professed, inveterate and incurable snuff taker, at a moderated computation takes one pinch every 10 minutes. Every pinch, with the agreeable ceremony of blowing and wiping the nose ... consumes a minute and a half.

Ship wrecks, reports of trials, hangings and bare fist boxing matches which went to more than twenty rounds were mentioned. The completion of the Union Canal was noted and it was reported that the proposed pillar of the statue of Viscount Melville in St Andrew Square was not to be solid but would contain a central staircase, access to which would be denied to the public. Henry Cockburn's proposal that a copy of the Parthenon should be erected on Calton Hill as the National Monument to commemorate the victorious conclusion of the Napoleonic wars was noted. (This was the only time that the Whig, Cockburn, was mentioned without criticism).<sup>13</sup>

An eye witness account of a sale of slaves in Richmond Virginia was reported. On one day more than 100 slaves, from the estate of a wealthy Scotsman, were disposed of. The patter of the auctioneer was given of which this extract is a sample:

Gentlemen, the next we offer you for sale is Billy! a good rough carpenter, about 38 years of age, able bodied and warranted sound; can do plantation work if required – Gentlemen, what will you give

me for the rough carpenter? - Will no one give me a bid for Billy?

Eventually Billy was sold for \$425. A couple with two children were sold together for \$840.<sup>14</sup>

The exclusion of Queen Caroline from Westminster Abbey at the coronation of George IV was described with much detail and gloating as was her chaotic funeral procession soon thereafter.<sup>15</sup> An incident was recorded in which a bullock escaped and ran into a baker's shop, ascended several flights of stairs and poked its head out of a garret window overlooking the mourners. Napoleon's death and memorial ceremonies were described.

Most of the paper, however, was taken up with attacks on opposing publications or individuals. The *Scotsman* for example was:

supported *principally for the private purposes of a few gentlemen, who occupy private stations at the Scots bar* ... The real guilt of the Scotsman's offence lies with Mr. Cockburn, Mr James Stuart, Mr James Gibson, Mr John Murray who report their own stupid and venomous harangues in its pages ... Mr Jeffrey, who on the day he first put pen to paper for the Scotsman, sealed the irreversible sentence of his own eternal degradation ... It is imposing on himself a supererogatory stain to give the shelter of his name to the malice, the slander, the earth-creeping insolence, and profligate stupidity of the *Scotsman*. (13 Jan 1821)

It is sometimes suggested to us, that we have not been sufficiently active in exposing the falsehoods and calumnies of this noxious publication. If we have not, it is chiefly from two reasons – first, that we have not been able to task ourselves with the intolerable drudgery of reading it regularly; and secondly, that we have too good an opinion of the public to think that it can be influenced by anything which is conveyed through so dirty a channel. (20 June 1821)

*Blackwood's Magazine* which like the *Beacon*, supported the Tories, was regarded favourably '... it is entirely free from the stupid affectation of dignity with which *The Edinburgh [Review]* and others endeavour to disguise their dulness (sic)'. (28 April 1821)

Despite its worthy objectives, the *Beacon* had developed into a scurrilous rag. Henry Brougham said that it was:

devoted to violent personal attacks, as well as political, like papers of the same kind established by the King's friends in England on the loss of their bill against the Queen. As generally happens, the party violence and the personal attacks reached a greater height, and were of longer continuance in provincial places than in the capital..<sup>16</sup>

Scott (by now Sir Walter), in 1821, wrote with uncanny prescience:

The news from Edinburgh is very distressing, for with the usual degree of party spirit there has existed of late a degree of violence which will be slaked, I fear, with nothing but blood; I expect daily to hear that someone is killed. The Scotsman and Review have much to answer for.<sup>17</sup>

Among the Whigs who were particularly abused were Francis Jeffrey, James Stuart, James Gibson and the MP Lord Archibald Hamilton. Jeffrey had the wisdom to ignore the libellous attacks but the others reacted vigorously. Lord Hamilton and Gibson each instituted actions for damages against the *Beacon*. Hamilton, who had been accused of cowardice, was awarded damages of 1 shilling by a jury on 19 June 1822. Gibson did rather better, being awarded £500 and costs against Stevenson and the financial backers of the *Beacon* on 9 December 1822.

#### THE RESPONSE OF JAMES STUART

James Stuart, who had been pilloried in almost every issue, reacted in a more physical manner. An item in the issue of 28 July 1821 was the last straw. On that date, the Saturday following the coronation from which Queen Caroline had been excluded, the *Beacon* reported that the Queen, who was pilloried by the Tories and championed by the Whigs:

...has announced her intention of soon visiting this City ... As to her receiving the slightest attention here from any person of respectability, it is quite out of the question ... We do believe that none above the rank of ... Mr James Stuart would commit such an outrage on decency and good manners.

The next issue contained a mocking scenario of Stuart acting as one of her Majesty's pages:

When however he is properly powdered, and dressed in a lace silk suit, with an open neck and round frill, and has been taught to *walk* instead of waddling, and to keep his hands out of his breeches pockets, I dare say he will *look* the page very well.

Scott described it as 'A very stupid joke in the Beacon paper against a hot-headed cold-livered crack-brained Whig, y-cleped James Stuart...',<sup>18</sup> a remark which indicates that Scott, although one of the founders of the paper, had no editorial influence.

It is difficult today to understand why such childish insults should cause a violent reaction but Stuart was incensed. Cockburn, commenting on the apparent triviality of such articles when viewed in retrospect, observed that 'the guilt of libel must be judged of as on the day it was committed, when the insinuations were understood...the insolence fresh, and the victim quivering'.<sup>19</sup> Stuart approached Stevenson on several occasions demanding to know the name of the author of the offending articles. Stevenson invariably refused, making the mendacious excuse that he, the publisher of the paper, did not know the source of the contributions. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, the frustrated Stuart met Stevenson in Parliament Close and proceeded to thrash him with a horse whip. Parliament Close in those days was the centre of commerce in Edinburgh, always teeming with people, many of whom witnessed the incident which attracted much public notice.<sup>20</sup>

Stevenson reacted by challenging Stuart to a duel which Stuart declined on the grounds that Stevenson's social status rendered him an unworthy opponent. (The etiquette of duelling demanded that it could only be engaged between individuals of equal social rank.) Stevenson retaliated by distributing a notice throughout the city which stated:

**I hereby notify to all whom it may concern, that**

**JAMES STUART, W.S.**

ISA

**Ruffian, a COWARD, and  
a Scoundrel**

*Edinburgh 16<sup>th</sup> August 1821*

*Dun. Stevenson*

#### THE DEMISE OF THE *BEACON*

While collecting evidence for his case, James Gibson obtained from Sir William Rae the names of the other 14 backers of the *Beacon*, most of whom were also senior law officers including the Solicitor General James Wedderburn, Advocate-Depute Henry Home Drummond MP for County of Stirling, John Hay Forbes, Sheriff Depute for Perth, John Hope, advocate and depute to the Lord Advocate, Sir Walter Scott and Colin Mackenzie both Principal

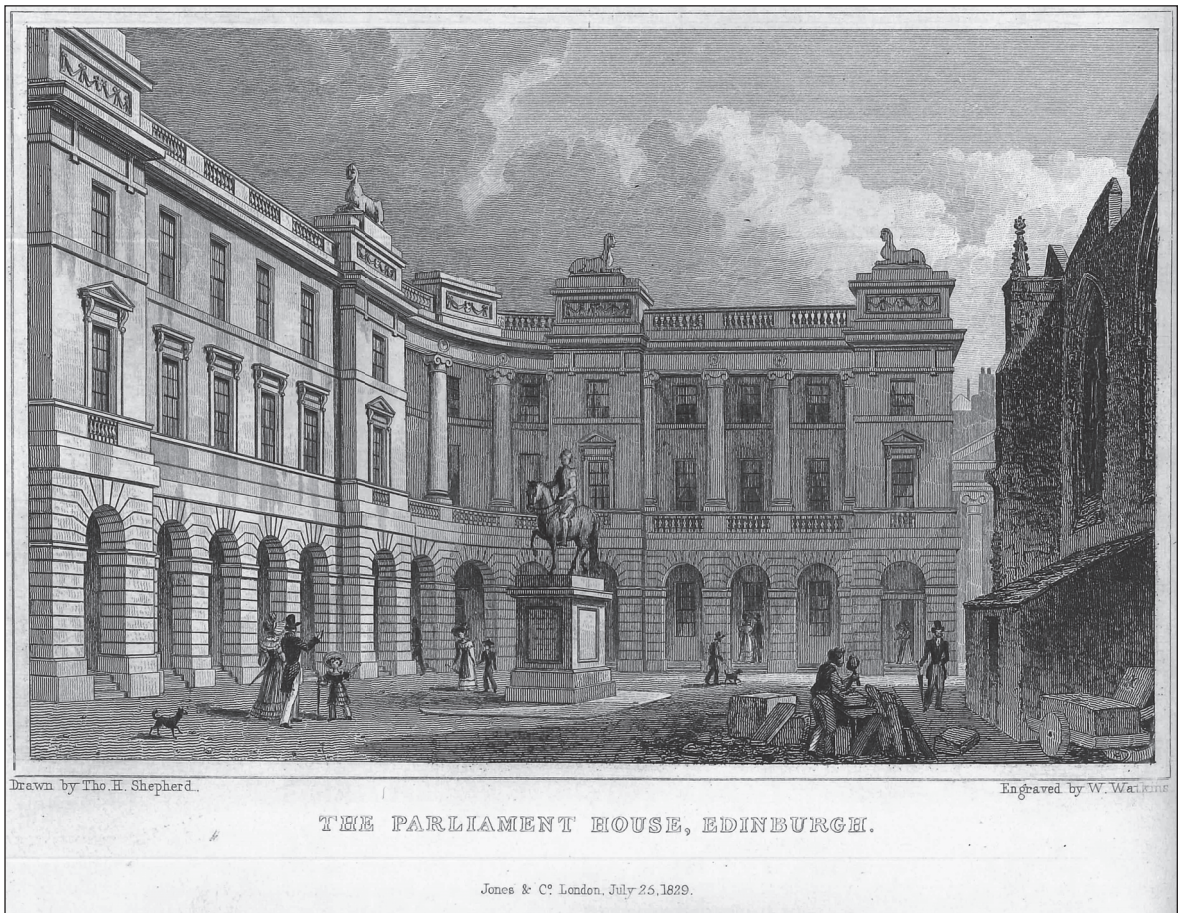


Fig. 3 Parliament House as drawn by Thomas Shepherd in the late 1820s. This showed the square as it would have looked at the time of *The Beacon's* publication. From *Modern Athens* displayed in a series of views of Edinburgh, London 1829. Copy in possession of Signet Library.

Clerks of Session and Rt. Hon. William Arbuthnot Lord Provost of Edinburgh. Once their names had become public knowledge, the financial backers of the *Beacon* shamed by the exposure, held a meeting on 21 September and decided to withdraw their support and the paper ceased publication just nine months after its launch. Cockburn gave credit to Gibson: 'His triumph in getting the *Beacon* demolished has been so great and the poor Tories seem so low and unhappy'.<sup>21</sup> Scott was one of those who were 'low and unhappy'. He had not been present at the meeting of backers but was informed of the decision in a letter from his colleague, Colin Mackenzie, dated 21 Sept 1821:

...I trust you do not disapprove our proceeding. It was a great pity but the step was indispensable ... It was agreed that

all must remain or all quit and we took it on us for the absent subscribers ... to notify the retirement of all.

Scott was not at all happy with the decision. He replied to Mackenzie 'I cannot well brook the idea of retreating before James Gibson's summons and James Stuart's pistol tinderbox and all without asking me if I chose to retreat or no'.<sup>22</sup> To William Erskine (Lord Kinnedder) he wrote on 27 September 1821:

I am terribly malcontent about the *Beacon*. I was dragged into the Bond against all remonstrances I could make and now they have allowed me no role with regard to standing or flying. *Entre nous*, our friends went into the thing like fools and have come out very like cowards. I was never so sick of a transaction in my life, though I thank God I have very little to do with it....<sup>23</sup>

What a hypocritical statement this was, for Scott was one of the leading figures in its foundation. In another letter to Lord Melville, 7 October 1821, Scott wrote:

the happy *fifteen* [the bonds men] have the appearance of having supported a system of political warfare while their names were concealed and of renouncing it as indefensible so soon as publicity attached to it ... I could have bit my nails for anger when I found they had made me accessory to a retreat before the summons of Mr James Giblets and the pistol-tinder-box of the other fellow.<sup>24</sup>

J R McCulloch, a Whig contributor to the *Scotsman*, wrote to Archibald Constable (Scott's publisher) on 9 Dec. 1821:

Of course you must be acquainted with all the particulars respecting the demise of The Beacon. The action which Mr Gibson has brought against the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor-General, your friend Sir Walter, and other enemies... of the Press ... these high personages are now defenders in an action in the Jury Court for publishing a base and false, and unfounded libel! If I were Jupiter, and had the selection of the jury, I would teach Sir Walter the expedience of sticking to his Poems and his Novels.<sup>25</sup> (The action referred to was the one mentioned above in which Gibson was later awarded £500 damages.)

Cockburn wrote:

Scott's conduct cannot be thought of without the deepest sorrow. The happiness of the city was disturbed, persons he had long professed and truly felt friendship for were vilified, private feelings were lacerated; and all this he could have prevented by a word or a look. But instead of preventing it, he gave it his countenance.<sup>26</sup>

The *Scotsman* newspaper, which had been calumniated in almost every issue of the *Beacon*, chose to ignore it, as being beneath its dignity, as long as it believed that it was being run by a printer. The exposure of influential Tory backers altered its attitude and initiated a series of editorials and articles attacking the *Beacon* and its supporters, particularly Sir Walter Scott and the Lord Advocate Rae. In its issue of 22 September, under a heading THE BEACON AND ITS PATRONS, it quoted Bayle:

Those who approve the authors and dispersers of defamatory libels are as guilty as if they had composed them. If they do not write such libels themselves, it is merely because they have not the talent for writing, or because they will run no hazard.<sup>27</sup>

The article proceeds at length to detail the iniquities of the *Beacon* 'Individuals in every rank of life ... have been unceasingly libelled, traduced, and vilified, in the most blackguard, brutal, and revolting terms'. It goes on to mock the claims by the backers that they were unaware of the content of the paper which they were supporting and 'stood safely concealed behind their hirelings'. Had it not been for the circumstance of their disclosure 'it is difficult to say how long this system of *subornation of slander* might have been carried on'.

*Blackwood's Magazine* being a Tory publication might have been expected to sympathise with the *Beacon* but instead it joined in the criticism:

... what a lump of dullness it was! it seemed to ... be got up just for the private amusement of three or four spalpeens. [Irish for layabouts] ... a mangy mongrel could not have lifted his leg, in passing, without putting it out'.<sup>28</sup>

The last issue of the *Beacon*, 22 September, contained the extraordinary statement that it had not attacked private individuals:

We have never, in any instance, attacked an individual who did not obtrude himself on the public ... or who did not chuse like Gibson and others, to run his head against the Beacon itself.

With regard to the accusation that the attacks were made under a system of concealment:

We have less concealment than any other paper in the kingdom. Our Editor avows himself to the public, and is ready to stand all the consequences of what he may publish, and if any one wishes to know the writer of anything concerning him, he has only to ask his name.... We abhor concealment and consider it as quite unworthy of the cause in which we are engaged. There never was a single anonymous sentence inserted in the Beacon....

What arrant barefaced lies! There was hardly a sentence in the paper that was not anonymous.

An article in *The Examiner* summarised the Whig view of the *Beacon*:

The "organised system of blackguardism," as the Scotsman has well termed it, is among the most alarming features of the times....we find this infamous system of anonymous slander patronized in the highest circle, and adopted as an engine of political warfare. It was in Edinburgh the infamous system first exploded; it was in Edinburgh that its connexion with a Government party was first fully disclosed.<sup>29</sup>



The authors of the libellous articles and poems in the *Beacon* were mostly young lawyers whose names were never revealed apart from one, Douglas Cheape,<sup>30</sup> who refused to contribute to the costs incurred by the *Beacon*, in the libel case against the paper which was won by Gibson, on the grounds that ‘if I do it will be held by the world that I own myself the editor of the Beacon – else why should I pay costs?’<sup>31</sup> A broadsheet entitled *The last Speech and Confession and Dying Declaration of the Beacon* hinted that other contributors included the advocates William Russell, Duncan McNeil, Blackmore and John Hope. Another anonymous paper added the names of William Menzies and Robert Dundas.<sup>32</sup>

The young lawyers who had contributed most of the articles felt let down when their seniors withdrew their support for the paper. Scott wrote to J W Croker, 2 July 1822:

I fear disunion between the elder and younger part of our Scottish friends very much at this moment. The younger brethren allege they were put into the front of fight and deserted on the first pinch and on my word I cannot say the accusation is altogether false though I have done my best to mediate betwixt the two parties and keep the peace if possible.<sup>33</sup>

BROADSHEETS

A flurry of broadsheets greeted the demise of the *Beacon*. One entitled *The Hydra with Fifteen Heads* contained a mock confession by the *Beacon* before ‘his’ execution, from which the following extracts are taken:

One of my parents ... is a lame poet ... I am apt to think he has had the greatest share in my composition. ... I was never better pleased than traducing and defaming... the most worthy of characters. ... I would have continued going on from bad to worse, had not a sudden check been put to my vicious career, by the persevering character and keen penetration of my invincible and determined foes J...s G.b..n, and his no less indefatigable and determined coadjutor J...s S...t.<sup>34</sup>

No one emerged from the debacle of the paper with any credit but the printer and publisher, Duncan Stevenson, managed to survive the furore and the libel actions against him and continued to run his business

successfully, becoming printer to the University. He diversified into property development, and having suffered a number of financial setbacks, died in 1867. His printing firm, Stevenson & Co, survived into the 1960s.<sup>35</sup>

Almost immediately after the *Beacon* died, a similar paper, the *Sentinel*, started up in Glasgow, ‘like a Phoenix from the ashes of the Beacon’. It continued with the same style of attacks upon Stuart and the other prominent Whigs. This time Stuart was successful in discovering the author of the libels who proved, to his astonishment, to be his relative, Sir Alexander Boswell, the elder son of James Boswell. Both men had similar backgrounds. They had studied law together at Edinburgh University and each had inherited estates to which they devoted much of their energies, but their politics were directly opposed. Boswell refused to apologise and a duel was inevitable. Boswell suffered a fatal wound and Scott’s prediction that ‘I expect daily to hear that someone is killd’ was fulfilled.

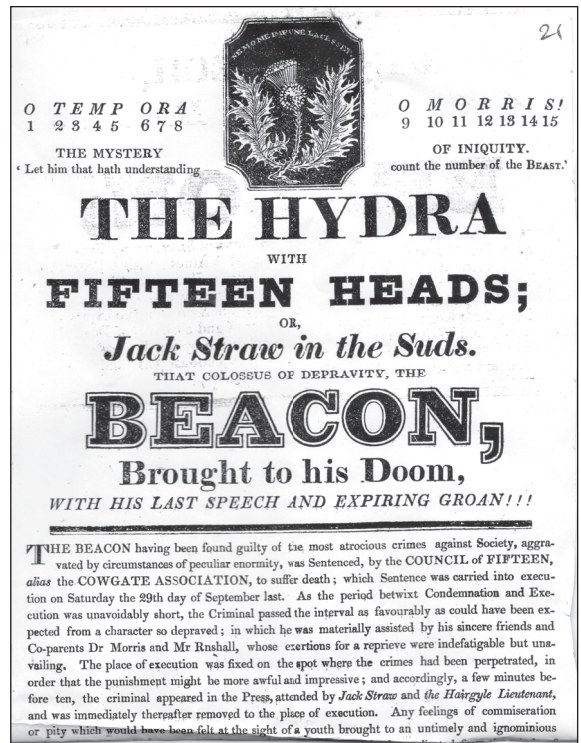


Fig. 4 One of the broadsheets which greeted the demise of the Beacon. National Library of Scotland

An account of the duel and Stuart’s trial are outside the scope of this article but can be consulted elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> One of the important consequences of the duel was the cleansing of the Scottish press. Some years before the duel, Topham in *Letters from Edinburgh* had written:

How happy would it be for Society, if some one could always be found to avow his right to all those defamatory invectives, the allegories of abuse, which

are frequently lavished on individuals by anonymous writers....but leave the guilty unknown.<sup>37</sup>

After the duel the Scotsman was able to report:

We must rejoice at the consequence to which the Scottish political duel must lead, - the washing out of the foulest stain that ever disgraced and degraded the periodical literature of a country.<sup>38</sup>

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 J.G. Lockhart, *Peter’s Letters*, 3 vols (Edinburgh 1819) I, p. 204.
- 2 A. Black, *Memoirs of Adam Black*, (Edinburgh 1885), p. 53. Of all these politically oriented publications –only the *Scotsman* has survived to the present day. The *Review* ceased publication in 1929 and *Blackwood’s* in 1980.
- 3 Anon, (1822) *The Trial of James Stuart Esq. Younger of Dunearn, before the High Court of Justiciary on Monday 10th day of June 1822*. (Edinburgh 1822) Introduction.
- 4 Lord Melville, Henry Dundas, Lord Advocate for Scotland and holder of many other offices of state under the Tory administration was without question the leading government figure in Scotland.
- 5 W. Scott, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, 12 vols (London 1932-37) VI, p. 22-24
- 6 John Wilson Croker (1780-1857) was a barrister, an Irish Member of Parliament and long serving secretary to the Admiralty. He was a resolute Tory, opposed to the Reform Bill. He wrote a number of books including an edition of Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* and critical articles in the *Quarterly Review*, a magazine which he helped to found in London in 1809, as a riposte to the liberal *Edinburgh Review*. John Gibson Lockhart became editor of the *Review* from 1826 until shortly before his death in 1854.
- 7 J. G. Lockhart *Peter’s Letters* II, p.194. ‘I rejoice in the privilege of writing and printing *incognito* – ‘tis the finest discovery of our age’.
- 8 W. Scott, *Letters* VI, pp. 20-1. 17 Nov 1819.
- 9 Sir William Rae (1769-1842) was appointed Lord Advocate of Scotland in the Tory dominated parliaments of that time. He was a close friend of Sir Walter Scott.
- 10 W. Scott, *Letters*, VI, pp. 21-22, 17 Nov 1819.
- 11 Washington Irving, letter to Scott, 20 Nov 1819. Cited in W. Scott, *Familiar Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, D. Douglas (ed.), 2 vols, (Edinburgh 1894), II, pp.60-1.
- 12 J.G.Lockhart, *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, 8 vols (Edinburgh 1837-38),VI, p.395.
- 13 Several other suggestions were made including a new church, but Cockburn’s was chosen. The foundation stone was laid during the visit of George IV to Edinburgh in the following year and work was stopped in 1830, when the project ran out of funds, leaving the incomplete fragment which exists today
- 14 Issue no 17 of 28 April 1821, p.135. Slaves were not always treated with such consideration. James Stuart in *Three Years in North America*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1833) II, p.113-4, records several instances in which slaves were separated from their spouses and children at auction sales. “They made a great crying scene”! Slavery was not unknown in Scotland. The *Edinburgh Courant* 30 August 1763, contained the following advertisement:- To be disposed of, a negro woman named Peggy, about nineteen years of age, born and brought up in Charlestown, in the province of South Carolina; speaks good English; an exceeding good house-wench, and washer and dresser; and is very tender and careful of children. She has a young child, a negro boy, about a year old, which will be disposed of with the mother.
- 15 The King, when Prince of Wales, had married his German cousin, Caroline, in 1795 for political reasons and rejected her soon after the birth of their daughter, Charlotte, a year later. The Princess had been allowed only limited access to her child and went to live abroad in Italy. On the accession of her husband to the throne in 1820, she indicated that she would like to return and resume her royal status. George IV tried unsuccessfully to obtain a divorce and the rejected Queen became symbol of martyrdom to the Whigs. The poor Queen died of intestinal obstruction a month after the coronation.
- 16 H. Brougham, *The Life and Times of Henry Lord Brougham written by himself*, (Edinburgh 1871), p. 503. Henry Brougham, as legal advisor to Queen Charlotte, was largely responsible for defeating George IV’s attempt to divorce his wife.
- 17 Scott’s letter to Archibald Constable 30 Sept 1821, in T. Constable, *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents* 3 vols.(Edinburgh 1873), III, p.162. This letter is reproduced also in Scott’s *Letters* VII p17, but in the Constable version, the two publications mentioned are the *Scotsman* and the *Beacon* instead of *Scotsman* and *Review*.
- 18 From a letter to Croker reproduced in C. L.Cline, *The Fate of Cassandra: The Newspaper War of 1821-22*, (University of Texas. Austin 1971), p. 50.
- 19 H. Cockburn, *Memorials of his time*, (Edinburgh 1909 edition), p. 357.

- 20 The meeting of the two men was not as coincidental as it might appear. Stevenson's workshop was located in Parliament Stairs which lead from Parliament Close to the Cowgate. Stuart was a director of an insurance company with an office in the Close. Their paths must have crossed frequently on their customary visits to the coffee shops and taverns in the Close.
- 21 Letter to Kennedy, 18 November 1821, in H. Cockburn, *Letters chiefly concerned with the affairs of Scotland* (London 1874), p. 36.
- 22 W. Scott, *Letters*, VII. Letter to Colin Mackenzie, 31 Sept. 1821, pp. 18-20.
- 23 *Ibid*, Letter to William Erskine (Lord Kinnedder), 27 Sept. 1821, pp. 11-12.
- 24 *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.
- 25 T. Constable, *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, II, p. 370.
- 26 H. Cockburn, *Memorials of his time*. p. 375.
- 27 Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) a French philosopher whose teachings had a profound influence on the Scottish Enlightenment.
- 28 *Blackwood's Magazine* XII, p. 709 Dec. 1822.
- 29 *The Examiner* No 744, April 7, 1822.
- 30 Douglas Cheape (1797-1861) Scott wrote in his *Journal* (14 December 1826) with regard to Cheape's application for the Chair of Civil Law "He deserves support having been very indifferently used in the affair of the Beacon where certain high Tories shewed a great desire to leave him to the mercy of the enemy." Cheape succeeded in becoming Professor of Civil Law at Edinburgh University 1827-1842.
- 31 H. Cockburn, *Letters to Thomas Francis Kennedy*. letter to Kennedy 13 February 1823
- 32 Earl of Rosslyn's correspondence NAS GD 164/452/14
- 33 W. Scott, *Letters* VII, pp. 205-6.
- 34 The lame poet is of course Walter Scott. J---s G-b—s and J---s S---t are James Gibson and James Stuart
- 35 M. Moss, (1995) *The Bibliothek*, 20, pp. 88-97. The curious case of Duncan Stevenson, printer to Edinburgh University.
- 36 J. Chalmers, *Duel Personalities*, (Edinburgh 2014). It is from this publication that much of the content of this article has been prepared.
- 37 E. Topham, (1776), *Letters from Edinburgh: written in the years 1774 and 1775*. 2 vols (London 1776), I, p. 208.
- 38 *The Scotsman*, 6 April 1822.