

THE BOOK
OF THE
OLD EDINBURGH
CLUB

The Journal for
Edinburgh History



Clarisse Godard Desmarest, 'Princes Street, Edinburgh: A Street of Encounters',
Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, New Series 15 (2019), pp. 13–27

~~~~~

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 information about The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (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](mailto:editor@oldedinburghclub.org.uk). The Club has a Take-Down Policy covering potential rights infringements. Please see <http://oldedinburghclub.org.uk/oec-take-down-policy>.



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



# PRINCES STREET, EDINBURGH: A STREET OF ENCOUNTERS

Clarisse Godard Desmarest

Princes Street, Edinburgh, is located within what today is the New Town Conservation Area and the Edinburgh World Heritage Site; and so its Outstanding Universal Value is protected by legislation. This unique architectural ensemble, on account of its size, monumentality and degree of preservation, constituted an essential component in the successful ‘Old Town and New Towns of Edinburgh’ bid to UNESCO in 1995.

Since the time of its construction in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, the street has witnessed significant change. The houses and tenements, designed by James Craig for domestic use, were transformed incrementally into workshops, hotels and inns in the nineteenth century, as commercialisation and tourism brought the requirement to accommodate the rising flow of travellers and tourists through Waverley, the city’s central train station.<sup>1</sup> By the 1940s and 50s, as elsewhere in the UK, the ideology of modernisation was influential in Edinburgh, and area plans were produced by Sir Patrick Abercrombie and other leaders of the post-war town planning movement. Their perception of the built environment was influenced by Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford who each considered that industrialism had produced a degraded urban development to the Victorian city. The ‘lack of any cohesion of design’<sup>2</sup> to Princes Street was considered problematic, which caused the demolition of several architecturally-distinguished Victorian and Edwardian buildings in the 1960s, including the New Club (original construction by William Burn, 1834, remodelled by David Bryce in 1859) and the Life Association block (David Rhind, 1855–1858). Some residues of post-war intervention – which included the project of a continuous elevated walkway – can be seen to this day. This includes British Home Stores (Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall & Partners, 1965)

and the replacement New Club (by Alan Reiach, in association with Stuart Renton, 1969). Percy Johnson-Marshall, whom we more commonly associate with George Square than with Princes Street, had been trained by Sir Patrick Abercrombie in the 1930s before embracing a career in town planning.

That general narrative, as a means of considering Princes Street, is well-known. This paper however takes a new and very different approach towards appraising Princes Street because here, rather than considering individual buildings or townscape development, our concern is instead to focus on how buildings encountered each other, particularly in the Old Town/New Town interface where Princes Street was the main viewpoint. A historical study such as this is surely vital, when the *Management Plan for the City 2017–22* has within its scope the necessity of protecting the key historic views. The Policy Environment 1 in the Local Development Plan (LDP) for the World Heritage Sites

requires development to respect and protect the outstanding universal values of the World Heritage Sites [The Old and New Town of Edinburgh and the Forth Bridge] and their settings. Setting may include sites in the immediate vicinity, viewpoints identified in the key views study and prominent landscape features throughout the city.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines the ways in which the two distinct urban entities – the Old Town and the New Town – responded to each other, and how the relationship with one another changed in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This involves identifying and highlighting the aesthetic, visual and symbolic relationships, as well as the more physical connections between Old and New Towns, namely, North Bridge and the Mound. Princes Street, and Princes Street Gardens, are of course on the interface between old and new.

To encounter Edinburgh before the New Town was built was to encounter a proud national capital city. There were two royal palaces, one situated at each end of the Royal Mile; a parliament and law courts, churches (notably St Giles, a remarkable skyline feature), a high school and a university. The Old Town, where the nobility and the professions both lived in a constricted space, provided the material conditions for the development of the Scottish Enlightenment; the New Town was an outcome of the Enlightenment which, ironically, mostly happened in the Old Town.<sup>4</sup>

Edinburgh was also then a place to view,<sup>5</sup> from surrounding ‘satellite’ villas. Most clearly, Inverleith House (designed in 1773 by David Henderson) was aligned south to face the Old Town; its situation on a hill offered a panoramic view of the Edinburgh skyline. Much earlier, Master of Work Sir James Murray of Kilbaberton (d.1634) aligned the east flank of his Baberton House (1622–23)<sup>6</sup> directly upon Edinburgh Castle, while Caroline Park (extended in 1683–96 for Sir George Mackenzie, 1st Viscount Tarbat) had a picture of the Old Town (a view from the north-west) on a chimney piece.<sup>7</sup> A landscape picture therefore served the purpose if the real thing was unavailable for viewing. Before the New Town

was built, prime views of Edinburgh included those from (broadly) the north, from more or less the same direction as Princes Street. As the Caroline Park painting shows, it was from there that Edinburgh’s visual and other qualities might be best appreciated, as the capital, a seat of justice, a centre of education and commerce, and simply, an admired sight.

The plan of the New Town (adopted in July 1767 by the Town Council) was rectilinear: a central axis with a square at each end and an open-aspect street to the north and the south. Princes Street was represented as a viewing terrace looking south to the Old Town and the castle, and the plan very clearly showed there to be no row of houses – in fact, no buildings whatsoever – planned for the south side of the street. The New Town, and its ashlar-faced buildings of the durable local Craigleith sandstone, was a sparkle of order and modernity. In the 1752 pamphlet *Proposals for carrying on certain public works in the city of Edinburgh* which led to the development of the New Town, Edinburgh’s ambition was to rival London and other continental cities like Berlin or Turin. The New Town was designed as a residential suburb for the more affluent, and the merchant classes; this significant urban entity became a monument in its own right.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 1. David Fraser Harris, p. 24

With this urban addition, the Old Town was still a thing to view, as before, but for a different reason; now, to present a negative, instead of a positive meaning. From Princes Street, there was what then could be regarded as the chaos of the ancient city's irregularly cluttered outward-facing buildings, and the openness of the view towards there was to be protected, to continue the narrative of that new encounter of Old Town/ New Town. As explained by Thomas Markus, the intention was to create 'a zone of order, luxury and visible status for the permanent use of the ruling elite', in contrast with 'the density, social mix and increasing squalor of the Old Town'.<sup>9</sup> Princes Street proprietors – the residents of the street – managed to preserve the open views from being spoiled or lost by a wall of houses in a five-year-long legal wrangle (settled in 1776). The New Town was beginning to spread beyond James Craig's setpiece and, before the Courts, the complainants argued that they had chosen to reside in the New Town on account of it being understood that there would be no buildings at its southern edge

by which means the proprietors of houses on that street in particular would enjoy advantages which they considered as of the greatest value, viz, free air, and an agreeable prospect. While, on the other hand, the fine opening of the city upon that street gave at once an idea of the beauty and elegance of the general design.<sup>10</sup>

The commitment of several famous New Town residents, such as David Hume and Sir William Forbes, to preserve the views explains why the land west of where the Waverley Steps now are was kept, for perpetuity, mostly as pleasure grounds.

The Old Town could now conveniently be repackaged to fit the Enlightenment historians' new trope/narrative of a dismal pre-Union age. Such an attitude is reflected in David Hume's – extremely influential – opinion about the Scots of the past, as cited by Roy Porter: 'the rudest perhaps, of all European Nations; the most necessitous, the most turbulent, and the most unsettled'.<sup>11</sup> In an era which saw the consolidation of the Union after the failure of the 1745/6 Jacobite uprising, and the strengthening of the Scots' role in the Empire, the Old Town came to symbolise disorder and unrest, backwardness and Jacobitism, as conveyed by an ever more Anglo-centric rhetoric – mainly the result of the Scottish elite's migration to London. By comparison, the New Town was to reflect the new aspirations of

Scotland, as described by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

The visitor on Princes Street was therefore likely to be told the story of a dismal past situated in the Old Town, as opposed to the Enlightened present and future which was made manifest by the New Town to its north. Register House, at the east end of Princes Street (a key part of the 1752 *Proposals* for the New Town), showed the remarkable reputation of Edinburgh as a city of intellectual brilliance. Scottish-born and London-based architect Robert Adam designed and built the national archives repository (1774–92); the monumental neo-classical building offered a grand termination to the North Bridge/Old College axis. Also an eye-catcher for the spectator looking out from the Old Town, and situated on the nearby site of the Old Calton Burying Ground, David Hume's tomb was designed and erected by Robert Adam as a Roman mausoleum for his philosopher friend, in 1777.<sup>12</sup> This tribute to the great luminary stood prominent and isolated in the landscape, as reflected in many of the early views of Edinburgh, including one from the east by Alexander Nasmyth; standing on top of its hill, the mausoleum was represented as connected to the dense Old Town fabric by the North Bridge in the foreground, with Edinburgh Castle featuring in the distance.<sup>13</sup>

This encounter, characterised by a stronger contrast between Old and New, served the new political rhetoric; one of the plans for the New Town had been a union flag lay-out, and the names of the streets reflected a strong, trenchant sense of Britain, united under the House of Hanover. Princes Street, the principal axis of this new urban development, was named after the heir to the Crown; King George III had previously considered that the initial preference, St Giles Street, 'would sound ill in English ears'.<sup>14</sup> Although the two urban spaces stood in marked opposition stylistically and geographically, the difference was perhaps more subtle in the minds of contemporaries. Many of the elite in the New Town still came to work in the Old Town. In the 1820s, however, the building of the Royal High School on Calton Hill was motivated by the need to offer the young – the pride of the nation – more adequate premises and, above all, to spare them the clutter and filth of the North Bridge. The journey along the bridge from the prestigious arteries of Queen Street and Great King Street to Infirmary Street in the Old

Town, where the Old Royal High was situated (until 1829), was judged improper:

the present situation of the School... has, ever since the commencement of the New Town, but chiefly since its more recent and rapid extension, become extremely inconvenient for the body of the inhabitants, whose sons form by far the largest proportion of the pupils, both in respect of distance and of access by the crowded thoroughfare of the two Bridges.<sup>15</sup>

The relocation of the Royal High School to a prime location on the Calton Hill, near the New Town and the new developments towards Leith, is an example of the exclusive social agenda of the elite. This distancing from the historic centre was later criticised by Patrick Geddes for whom the gridded regularity of the New Town was a symptom of London's domination. Besides, the squalor generated by industrialisation in the 'historic Mile of Old Edinburgh' could not obliterate, for Geddes, the fact that 'the town planning of the thirteenth century was conceived ... on lines in their way more spacious than those which have made our "New Town" and its modern boulevard of Princes Street famous.'<sup>16</sup> This explains why Geddes's initiatives in urban reform were concentrated in the medieval Old Town (notably the Lawnmarket area).

The meaning of the encounter changed, however, when the Old Town made a show front for itself. This narrative is described in the World Heritage listing for the site:

The Old and New Towns together form a dramatic reflection of significant changes in European urban planning, from the inward looking, defensive walled medieval city of royal palaces, abbeys and organically developed burgh plots in the Old Town, through the expansive formal Enlightenment planning of the 18th and 19th centuries in the New Town, to the 19th century rediscovery and revival of the Old Town with its adaptation of a distinctive Baronial style of architecture in an urban setting.<sup>17</sup>

Scotland's military contribution to the Napoleonic wars, and Waterloo in particular, made the Scots, from 1815 onwards, increasingly proud of themselves; and it was from this context that the Baronial style emerged: 'This richly complex ideology formed a key building block of Scotland's increasingly fervent unionist nationalism, which was inspired by a practical recognition of the unrivalled power and status of Britain in the decades following the 1814–15 Council of Vienna.'<sup>18</sup> Being both martial and Scottish, this style contented Scots, proud of

their martial tradition, but also reminded England that Scotland's input had been necessary for Britain's military objectives to have been achieved. Thus the style reflected the point that Scotland placed itself in the role of invaluable, and also dutiful, assistant to the mighty neighbour. Baronial buildings carrying such messages were to appear not simply within the Old Town, but also on its face to Princes Street, as we shall see.

The Bank of Scotland features in a highly prominent location in the Old Town at the south end of the Mound, an artificial hill which was formed by otherwise unwanted earth excavated and dumped from the foundations of the New Town.<sup>19</sup> The site for the bank was bought in 1800 and the original building was designed by Robert Reid and Richard Crichton (built 1802–6); David Bryce re-modelled it substantially in 1864–70, giving it its present vigorous form. The headquarters of 'the Bank', as it was commonly referred to, reflected Edinburgh's flourishing economy – the financial industry was growing to service the needs of government and the landed gentry, and to provide financial support for developing industry (cotton, coal, iron, engineering and ship-building). The building, and its screen wall designed to mask its rocky 'plinth' and excessive height, provided the opportunity for flying another union flag to prove, reassuringly, that the encounter was with a consolidated Britain; while in exploiting this most prominent location, the bank also announced to the wealthy of the New Town that all was well, financially.

Also, in the mid nineteenth century, the Old Town began to be rebuilt in a Scottish revivalist/Baronial style. David Bryce used a 'Flemish', or Baronial, style for the Evening Courant office (1871–2) and Daily Review office (1872–3) on St Giles Street, the latter forming a distinct and crow-stepped mass overlooking the New Town. Urban housing in the Old Town saw a vigorous redevelopment drive in this period, based on a new City Improvement Act (1867). The work of Archibald Burns, a talented commercial photographer, shows a bleak landscape as some parts of the Old Town were preparing for demolition, while being recorded by him for posterity.<sup>20</sup>

Thanks also to the 1853 Edinburgh Railway Station Access Act, which was meant to facilitate the connection between the railway and the Old Town, a curved street – the new Cockburn Street

– was laid out in 1856 and developed in 1859–64 by speculative builders to designs by Peddie & Kinnear. This street, loaded with turrets and crowstepped gables and cutting through the medieval urban fabric, provided a monumental and Baronial gateway into the Old Town, and Lord Cockburn – a keen advocate of conservation – featured in a medallion portrait at 1 Cockburn Street. When coming out of the noisy station, visitors would therefore have either encountered the city through a street whose style harked back to the Scottish past; or, in the other direction, through a street constructed in pure geometry and sleek neoclassical style. Theodor Fontane, a German novelist and admirer of Walter Scott, shared this common experience of the tourist travelling into the city by train from London, and then emerging from the station to stay in a hotel on Waterloo Place.<sup>21</sup> By that time Princes Street had been converted to commercialisation, with the back lands transformed into shops; fundamental changes of use and rebuilding were allowed to happen to the buildings on Princes Street in the nineteenth century

largely because of the absence of controls under Scots property law.<sup>22</sup> The train and the station, with flows of tourists coming into the city, made Princes Street a centre of commercial power; a close analysis of trade directories proves the point that Edinburgh was then a well-connected hub.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the effects of industrialisation, the Old Town became celebrated for its picturesque qualities. The 1886 International Exhibition in the Meadows in some ways encapsulated the change in outlook that had taken place in Edinburgh from the 1850s. With its focus on an exhibit representing the Old Edinburgh Street, designed by Sydney Mitchell (who was later to work with Patrick Geddes), the International Exhibition presented a change in taste from the Georgian to the Romantic and picturesque; that is, from the New Town to the once-again delectable Old Town.<sup>24</sup> In this celebration of the city's rediscovered rhetorically glorious past, one great focus of the exhibition, for example, was the Netherbow Port (demolished 1764), the historic gate which separated the burgh of Canongate from the city of Edinburgh;



Fig. 2. Drawing of Cockburn Street from Market Street c.1860 <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/793542>

thereby illustrating the nostalgic fondness for the very same past which the eighteenth century modernists had disdained.

When the exhibition opened, Geddes lived in Princes Street, but during that year, probably coincidentally, but nonetheless symbolically, he made the crucial move to the Old Town, living in James Court from 1887, beginning a process of rehabilitation and development in the Lawnmarket area. From this time on, and until the end of the century, Geddes carried out an enormous amount of re-planning and conservation work in the Old Town; in James Court, Riddles Court and Mylne's Court.

The culmination of Geddes's work in that area was the development of Ramsay Gardens, in 1890–3.<sup>25</sup> Based around and engulfing the old house of the eighteenth century poet Allan Ramsay (yet retaining its polygonal north front for display), he used local architects to create a fantastic showpiece of neo-medieval townscape, highly visible from Princes Street; and there he developed his ideas of a mixed community. His philanthropic impulse paralleled a romantic interest in Scottish history. In those days, also, politicians W E Gladstone and Lord Rosebery were instrumental in the revival of the Old Town. Gladstone, who took great pride in his Scottish blood, restored the ancient Mercat Cross of Edinburgh before gifting it to the capital of Scotland in 1885 and, similarly, Scottish-born aristocrat Lord Rosebery purchased and restored Lady Stair's House in 1897 which he then donated to the City of Edinburgh, in 1907.<sup>26</sup> Rosebery gave the house a completely new crow-stepped gable facing the New Town.

To Geddes, the citizens had to be responsible for the evolution of the city, a living organism; and for that reason, the ancient and modern city in its widest possible context had to be understood. His solution to this in Edinburgh was the Outlook Tower, the top of which could be clearly seen from Princes Street; and so with this building, Geddes made his work in the Old Town extremely noticeable. Geddes acquired the building in 1892 and took management of the already-existing camera obscura of what had been Short's Observatory – the aim was to understand the city in relation to its surroundings. The idea was that the visitor would start at the top of his building and encounter a series of displays relating variously to Edinburgh, Scotland, Language (English-speaking countries), Europe, and the World. The Tower was the

embodiment of a Civic Survey which was necessary, for Geddes, to understand a city's evolution. Much earlier, in the 1780s, Robert Barker's panorama stood on Calton Hill;<sup>27</sup> and until the mid-nineteenth century a rotunda had also been located on the Mound nearby, knowledge of which would probably have served as an inspiration to Geddes.

In the nineteenth century the capital was transformed into an integrated Romantic city, formed of a rich overlaying of vistas. In his 1878 *Picturesque Notes*, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that the picturesque came from the aesthetic contrast between Old Town and New Town: 'The two re-act in a picturesque sense, and the one is the making of the other.'<sup>28</sup> The excitement was captured by painters like Alexander Nasmyth with his *Edinburgh from Calton Hill* (1825) and *Edinburgh from Princes Street, with the Royal Institution under Construction* (1825). This dual identity, between rational and emotional, which Stevenson describes in his novel *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, is sometimes claimed to be a fundamental aspect of the Scottish psyche. The city was branded as the Athens of the North, and its Sublime and Picturesque elements had also to be accentuated. In his description of the view to the Old Town from the Calton Hill, William Stark wrote:

[...] at that point the view of the old town becomes exceedingly grand, from its parts being so assembled as to shew in a very striking degree the contrast of great depth and great elevation, and from the accidental and happy grouping of its great masses of buildings, which combine in large and picturesque forms, with broad effects of light and shadow, and occasionally with splendid colouring.<sup>29</sup>

The Mound, connecting the Old Town to the New, became a focus of attention, and for that location two of the most talented architects of their time, Thomas Hamilton and William H Playfair, provided designs for a National Gallery and a Royal Scottish Academy. Both designs (1848) show the architects' response to the urban picturesque, and the necessity of preserving the views to the castle when approaching Princes Street from the east.<sup>30</sup> The Mound was eventually built upon in the 1840s and 1850s by Playfair. In this respect, the Mound was an important intermediary space, and several proposals were made from 1817 onwards to connect it to the south side of the city; suggestions were made by Alexander Trotter, Alexander Nasmyth, William Burn and Thomas Hamilton.<sup>31</sup> Hamilton's



Fig. 3. Princes Street from the Mound by Charles Halkerston, 1843. City Art Centre, Edinburgh  
<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/princes-street-from-the-mound-edinburgh-93365>



Fig. 4. Thomas Hamilton, *Design for National Gallery and Royal Scottish Academy*



design was influenced by the recent work of John Nash who, as architect to the Commissioners of Woods, Forests and Land Revenues, had been involved in the planning of a new street in London's West End, connecting Portland Place to Carlton House from 1810 onwards. Among the different proposals for connecting the Old Town to the South, one by Hamilton in 1824 proposed a new road on the south flank of the Castle rock from the West Port to the High Street; the idea of the promenade, which was well established for Princes Street, was to be appropriated by Hamilton for the Old Town.<sup>32</sup> The intention was to offer new views to the rugged Castle, and was typical of the picturesque theories that were also developed by William Stark, William Burn, William H Playfair, and in England, John Nash. The view to the Castle from the Grassmarket was a popular one amongst the Romantics. Today, the castle has of course been recognised as one of the landmark features, to be protected, that make up the iconic image of the city of Edinburgh.<sup>33</sup> Here we see not simply the desire that views towards it should be protected, but we see too aspects of its own changing narrative over the centuries.

Even when it was dark, the Old Town still performed a Picturesque task, by providing a pleasurable view to the viewer in Princes Street, with the random-looking display of lights; and this was a factor pointed out to tourists:

As the day darkens into night a most imposing and singular sight is the display of lights from the irregular levels of the buildings of the 'Old Town', as seen from Princes Street, giving one the idea of some general illumination rather than the ordinary every night aspect of the city.<sup>34</sup>

This perception is something we in the age of modern street lights cannot now see. And of course, there was nothing said to suggest the corresponding view towards the New Town was remarkable; because to contemporaries, it simply was not.

The 'battle of the spires', and of the churches, formed another type of encounter in the Old and New Towns interface. This was a competition of pre-eminence between buildings. The Castle signalled the long-established royal presence and martial authority, and was historically the city's highest point. The ancient palace block was reconstructed in 1615–7 for the 1617 royal visit of James VI/I; faced in dressed ashlar towards the town, it had

elegant corner turrets and projecting stair towers with ogee roofs. John Elphinstone's 'Prospects of Edinburgh Castle from south east and from east' of c.1746, reproduced in Hugo Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh, 1779*, shows the union flag on the 1570s Half-Moon Battery,<sup>35</sup> which suggests that the castle was expected to be viewed primarily from the south and southeast; from the Grassmarket and the Royal Mile, in the Old Town.

By the early nineteenth century the Castle was beginning to be modified by a new awareness of its historical importance, and perhaps also its Romantic associations. An octagonal stair tower of James VI's palace was heightened as a crenellated flag tower, c.1820.<sup>36</sup> That stair tower, accessible via the interior quadrangle of the Castle, was similar to the half-recessed octagonal tower in the north quarter of Linlithgow Palace – reconstructed (1618–24) after a design by Murray of Kilbaberton. Following a punitive expedition in Scotland by Government troops in 1745/6 when Linlithgow Palace was sacked, it was left to decay. However, the palace appealed later to Romantics such as Walter Scott and J M W Turner, who illustrated it as a Romantic ruin in their *The Provincial Antiquities and Picturesque Scenery of Scotland* (c.1822–25). Such a stylistic connection between Edinburgh Castle and the ancient royal palace (Linlithgow), in the form of a typically Scottish tower, recognised the value of the Scottish past, and its association with the Stuarts – and both royal residences appealed to the Romantics. At Edinburgh Castle, the royal and military presence was therefore strengthened thanks to the new flag tower, which could be seen clearly from Princes Street. This tower was also intended to serve a new viewing audience living to the north and northeast, and it provided a symbolically reassuring presence to the place of successful commerce which Princes Street had become. The point was that the Half-Moon Battery, barely seen from the New Town, was by that time obsolete for a flag, and thus the more visible new location was deemed necessary.

The Castle, as viewed from Princes Street, was the climax of an unparalleled vista. This was emphasised after 1816, when an Act of Parliament was obtained for private gardens to be laid out between Princes Street and the Castle; major work on them started in 1821–2, when the Nor' Loch was drained.<sup>37</sup> The esplanade was developed in 1816–20; ornamental

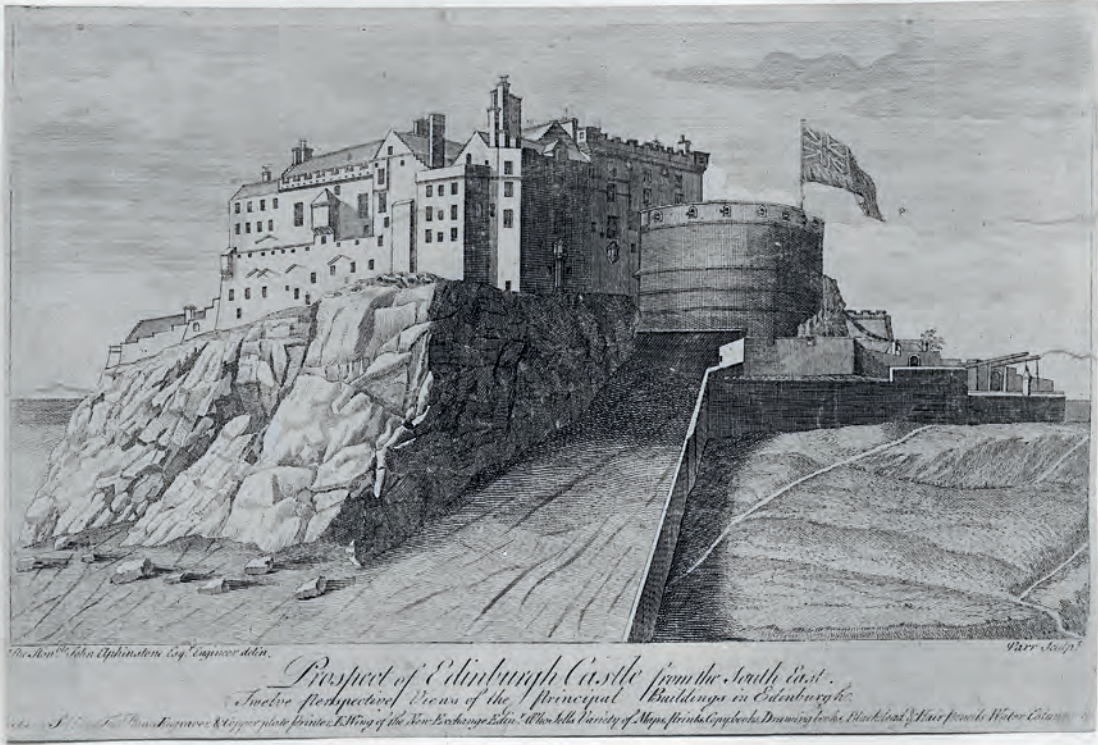


Fig. 5. Prospects of castle from south east and from east <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1163418>

walls were added along each side of this open area outside the castle. The Romantic interest in the Castle was furthered by Scott, and his rediscovery of the Regalia of Scotland in 1818. In 1829 Mons Meg, the great cannon which had been a pre-Union symbol of Scottish martial patriotism and valour, ‘confiscated’ as an anti-Jacobite gesture in the eighteenth century, was returned from the Tower of London to Edinburgh Castle. All these factors – whether visible or not from Princes Street – nonetheless heightened the sense of the Castle’s importance in a way that the viewer would clearly understand: which is to say, that here, the encounter was through both visual and intellectual means.<sup>38</sup>

All of this planning and work done suggests that Edinburgh was ready for a royal visit (George IV in 1822), when in the background were the Radicals (people seeking democracy) and the executions of the ‘ringleaders’ of the 1820 Rising. So another factor might have been more urgent politics – to get Scots to adore their king. Starting from Leith, George IV’s procession in the City went through the New Town, culminating at the Castle, where he waved his hat to the crowd. The opening of Regent Bridge three years earlier, in August 1819, during the visit of Prince Leopold of Saxe Coburg to

Edinburgh, has the appearance of having been a test run for the real thing.<sup>39</sup>

The growth and improvement of the city was expressed in the views produced in engravings by Thomas Shepherd for Edinburgh: prestigious buildings were minutely represented and conveyed a sense of pride.<sup>40</sup> For example, the National Monument (1826–9) on Edinburgh’s Acropolis, framed by Waterloo Place, was one of the first eye-catching scenes the visitor from the west would encounter.<sup>41</sup> The Royal High School was conceived as a building to be approached from the Regent’s Bridge, and to be embraced visually from many viewpoints: ‘such an erection should be of an ornamental character, as it will be a conspicuous object from many points, and particularly prominent on entering the town by the splendid approach of the Regent’s Road.’<sup>42</sup> Terminating the view along Princes Street – hitherto a street designed for looking south – there arrived a new political landscape on Calton Hill; now, people had a direct encounter with the Scottish heroes of the French wars, and they could both honour the fallen and celebrate their British nationalism. The tower to Lord Nelson, by Robert Burn 1807–15, was clearly visible from the west end of Princes Street, and all along its length.<sup>43</sup> John Steell’s statue of the Duke

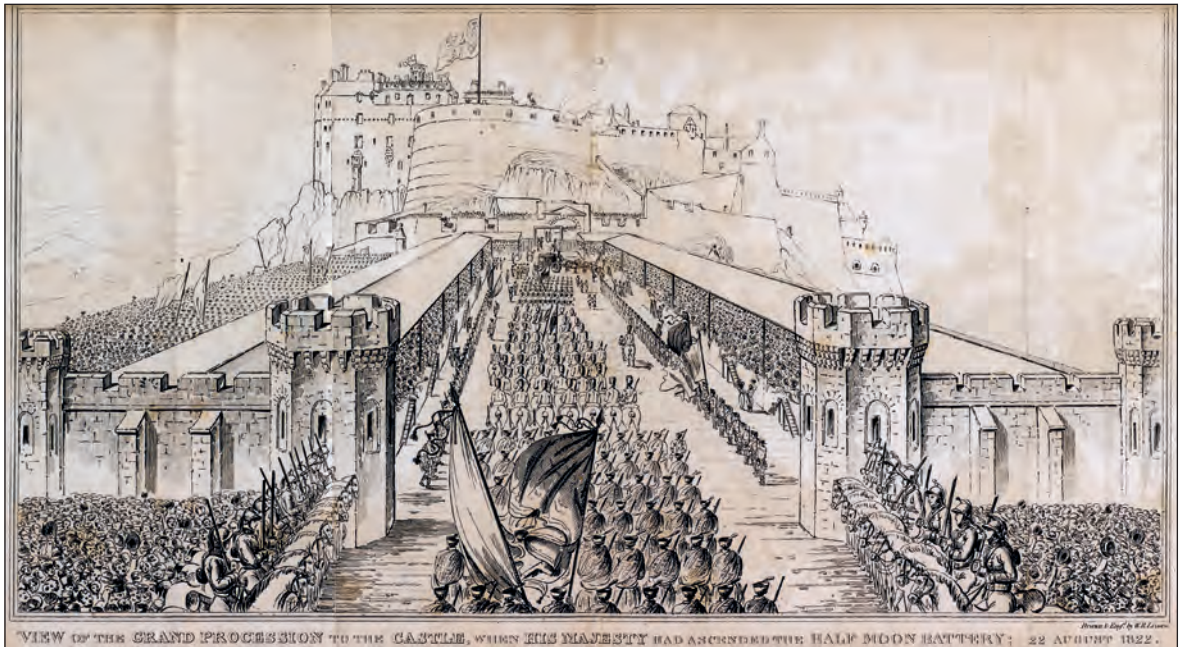


Fig. 6. View of the Grand Procession to the Castle, when his Majesty had Ascended the Half-Moon Battery, 22 August 1822



Fig. 7. Shepherd's 'Waterloo Place, the National & Nelson's Monument's, Calton Hill &c Edinburgh' in *Modern Athens! Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century*, 1829 <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1228727>

of Wellington (1852) was a later example of British patriotism. Positioned in the New Town outside Register House, it faced the North Bridge, and the traveller from the Old Town; thereby connecting the two by means of a New Town vista, contrasting with the more panoramic southwards view from the remainder of Princes Street. Public buildings and statues were among the cultural expressions of the urban pride and identity increasingly celebrated in the 1850s.<sup>44</sup> In a wider context which saw High Tories, Radicals, Romantics and Established Church, the Scots were keen to emphasize that, culturally, they were a European nation.

In the 1810s, the Episcopal Church announced its presence on the west approach to Princes Street (William Burn's St John's Church). Then, the Church of Scotland commissioned James Gillespie Graham to design a new building (1839–44), known as Victoria Hall (later Tolbooth St John Church). This was the new highest building in the Old Town – higher, almost incredibly, than the recently-

heightened castle – and it was clearly seen from the New Town, signalling the triumph to all of the Kirk, and aligned on the southern vista of Dundas Street, thereby embedding it into the fabric of the city. But following the Disruption of 1843 – a schism within the established Church of Scotland – the new Free Church expanded very rapidly and built its College in an even more prominent location than the church that had just been erected by the Church of Scotland. The Free Church's first theological college, by Playfair, in the Gothic style (1846–50), had prominent towers which were audaciously designed to frame and capture in views the steeple of the rival Tolbooth Church, all to be seen looming above the Doric portico of Playfair's Royal Institution at the bottom of the Mound, and dominating the vista as a seeming setpiece from Dundas Street.<sup>45</sup> The new college was meant to point to the nation's future; and on the same vista, a large seated statue of the young Queen Victoria was added to crown the north pediment of the Royal Institution in 1844. The



Fig. 8. View down Hanover Street to RSA/Free Church/Tolbooth, 1870 <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/466213>

sculptor Sir John Steell intentionally depicted the Queen in robes ‘draped so as to give a general idea of Britannia’.<sup>46</sup> The narrative behind the building of churches or training colleges for the church was to show that the Scots did their religion differently from the rest of Britain, and that also they had their own banks – not branches of London ones – which were equally successful. Such assertive displays in the urban landscape mirrored an energy in the capital which translated also in the debates about poverty and philanthropy. This was connected to the increasing national consciousness of Scotland, which Bob Morris describes as follows:

To some extent the social, political and cultural energy which might have been devoted to the creation of national institutions was focused on the many institutions of the local state and the voluntary sector. Thus these organizations were charged with expressing and developing the complex awareness of Scotland as a nation within a nation and Edinburgh as a capital city without a state.<sup>47</sup>

The visitor on Princes Street also encountered a long row of national heroes. In this Romantic city Sir Walter Scott was to be celebrated by an enormous Gothic monument in a setting between both Old and New towns; though located closer to the New Town, which his statue faced. But the viewer could never view the front of Scott’s statue without standing in the New Town; while it was inevitably silhouetted against the Old Town. The paradigms were therefore shifting in accord with Romanticism, and the Old Town was now the appropriate background, or ‘frame’, for the great man. The Romantic looking Old Town appeared too in Joseph Ebsworth’s south view from the Scott Monument (1847).<sup>48</sup>

By contrast, the Melville monument, erected a generation earlier (1821–3) and which celebrated Tory politician Henry Dundas, was intended primarily for engagement or encounter with the New Town.<sup>49</sup> There was no wish in that instance to celebrate any sense of Romanticism, and both foreground and

backdrop was classical modernity.<sup>50</sup> On Princes Street, other national figures of Scotland's intellectual or martial past were commemorated – including poet Allan Ramsay (statue carved in marble by Sir John Steell in 1865, and resting on a castellated pedestal by David Bryce), already mentioned, and explorer David Livingstone (sculpted by Amelia R. Hill, 1875). As opposed to these monuments facing north (ie, with their backs to the sun, and consequently less easy to see in detail), the military monuments placed on the Castle esplanade faced south; but as they were silhouetted in views from Princes Street, they were also therefore part of the 'conversation' between Old and New Towns.

Even though George Street was intended to be the central, most prestigious axis in the New Town development, Princes Street became the main commercial axis in the nineteenth century. Jenners (designed by William Hamilton Beattie, 1893–5) was one of the biggest department stores in Britain and in the world. The choice of an English Renaissance style of pink stone was a clear signal that Jenners should be regarded as being precisely the same as an English/London shop; the visitors' encounter was with a little bit of London greatness, and the shop was referred to as the 'Harrods of Edinburgh'. The six-storeyed building has rich strap work, and its corner, copied from the Bodleian Library, Oxford, rises skyward into an octagon with flying buttresses.

Contrary to what has been discussed above, Waverley Station and the railway sought to avoid any encounter with the urban landscape and Princes Street as best it could – hiding in a low channel, part-concealed beneath a bridge, with low roofs, and descending ramps. It consequently circumvented the restrictions put to building above street level on the south side of Princes Street, which had been supported by the Association of Princes Street Proprietors. The station was opened in 1846 as an extension of the North British Railway line; the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway (opened in 1842) having terminated at Haymarket railway station, short of Princes Street. As stated above, preserving the views, the 'glorious prospects', as Cockburn called them, was a constant concern ever since the New Town was first built. And it is symptomatic that one of the two ramps descending into/reaching out from Waverley Station was directly aligned with the portico of Playfair's Gallery building, maintaining

the New Town's emphasis on vistas. And on the scale of the city as a whole, the Mound and the Meadows offered some of the clearer views which the Cockburn Society had been concerned with preserving.

The North British Railway Hotel is the only building on the south side of East Princes Street above the street level (save for St John's Church at its opposite end). It took seven years to build (opened in 1902), and was designed by W Hamilton Beattie at a cost of £380,000 (initial estimate £221,000).<sup>51</sup> On a prominent site on the corner of Princes Street and North Bridge Street, the building, in a Renaissance style and with elaborate details on all sides, is unobstructed by any surrounding buildings, and as a result is imposing from any point of view. The hotel was built to accommodate the rise in tourism – the first manager had extensive experience of hotel business in London and on the Continent – and to offer expensive sleeping accommodation: 'Nearly all the public rooms have an outlook to the west. This gives them a magnificent view along Princes Street and the valley, taking in the picturesque ridges of the Old Town and the Castle'.<sup>52</sup> The west and north fronts on the level of Princes Street were occupied by the principal public rooms of the hotel, public restaurants and bars on the north-east corner, and the North Bridge front at the ground level was taken up with shops. The south side of the building offered provisions for the accommodation and offices of the North British Railway Company. It was then considered that the building had a striking appearance from the west and south, from which it was best seen, but the scale of the building was considered more problematic:

The only fault that might be found with the hotel is that its great length and breadth, and especially its height, has disturbed the architectural status quo of the neighbourhood, has tended to dwarf in some measure such important edifices alongside of it as the Register House and the Post Office, and that in a perspective view of the street from the west, it robs, to a certain extent, the Scott Monument of its former imposing character.<sup>53</sup>

The symbolic landscape of literary figures or national war heroes was overshadowed by this addition to the urban landscape. The scale of the North British Hotel was somewhat matched by the Scotsman building, on the south of the North Bridge. With its elaborate sculpture and the use of traditional imagery (lion and unicorn, symbolising British union) on the north front, the Baronial style building of The Scotsman (designed

by Dunn and Findlay, built 1899–1903, sculpture by Frederick Schenk) offered an extraordinarily imposing entrance to the Old Town, and reflected the growing awareness that Scottish national identity was based upon history.<sup>54</sup> Contrary to the view looking southwards from Dundas Street/Hanover Street to the Old Town which points to a series of framed spires, the view to the east is less spiritual and points, rather, to the martial successes of Scotland, and Britain, in the early nineteenth century. And as the century progressed, the view of Princes Street from the Old Town highlighted the commercial success of Edinburgh, as shops with ever-larger buildings

replaced many of the first generation classical houses.

This story of how the meaning of Edinburgh's Old Town changed over time – from noble ancient capital of the seventeenth century to the chaotic theatrical jumble of the eighteenth century, to Romantic paradigm of the nineteenth – is a critical part of Edinburgh's story. So also is the way in which politics and religion critically shaped so much of what we see and enjoy today in the everyday buildings which still 'speak' to each other across the space that separates Old Town from New Town.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 S. Nenadic, 'The Spatial and Social Characteristics of Craft Businesses in Edinburgh's New Town c.1780–1850' in C. Godard Desmarest (ed.), *The New Town of Edinburgh: An Architectural Celebration* (Edinburgh 2019), pp. 114-27;
- 2 R. Rodger, 'Mobile City: Edinburgh as a Communications Hub 1775–1825', *Ibid*, pp. 128-46.
- 3 P. Abercrombie and D. Plumstead, *A Civic Survey for the City of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1949), plate 31 following p. 60.
- 4 Edinburgh City Council, 'Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site Management Plan 2017–22', p. 4.
- 5 Murray Pittock, *Enlightenment in a Smart City: Edinburgh's Civic Development, 1660–1750* (Edinburgh 2018).
- 6 For a discussion of pictorial views see Alyssa Jean Popiel, *A Capital View: The Art of Edinburgh: One Hundred Artworks from the City Collection* (Edinburgh 2014). See also the work of Patricia R. Andrew, e.g. "'A Venerable and Romantic Ruin': St. Anthony's Chapel and its Place in Edinburgh's Historical and Visual Image", *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New series, vol. 10 (2014), pp. 1-16.
- 7 'Its flank, intentionally or not, is aligned on Edinburgh Castle – Murray's occasional workplace, whose maintenance was his responsibility.' Aonghus MacKechnie, 'Sir James Murray of Kilbaberthon: King's Master of Works, 1607–34', in Olivia Horsfall Turner (ed.), *The Mirror of Great Britain': National Identity in Seventeenth-Century British Architecture* (Reading 2012), p. 33.
- 8 David Fraser Harris, *Caroline Park House and Roystoun Castle: A Descriptive and Historical Account* (Edinburgh 1896), pp. 24-5. The picture – removed by the Duke of Buccleuch to Dalkeith Palace in 1872 – was described as being 'in the front or balcony room'.
- 9 Miles Glendinning, Randal MacInnes, Aonghus MacKechnie, *A History of Scottish Architecture: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Edinburgh 1996), p. 189.
- 10 Thomas A. Markus, *Order in Space and Society. Architectural Form and its Context in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh 1982), pp. 8, 17, 28.
- 11 A. J. Youngson, *The Companion Guide to Edinburgh and the Borders* (Woodbridge 2001 [1993]), p. 117.
- 12 Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London 2001), p. 243.
- 13 Iain Gordon Brown, 'David Hume's Tomb: A Roman Mausoleum by Robert Adam', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 121 (1991), pp. 391-422.
- 14 Iain Gordon Brown, pp. 413-5.
- 15 'Extract from Town Council minutes containing Sir John Pringle's letter to Lord Provost Gilbert Laurie, December 1767', in Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser (eds.), *The Ingenious Architect of the New Town of Edinburgh': James Craig 1744–95* (Edinburgh 1995), pp. 42-3.
- 16 *Address from the Town Council of Edinburgh on the Subject of the New Buildings for the High School of Which the Foundation was Laid on 28 July 1825* (Edinburgh 1825), p. 4.
- 17 Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London 1915), p.13.
- 18 UNESCO, *UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, World Heritage Committee, 9th Session Berlin, 4-9 December 1995, report, 31 January 1996*, p. 49.
- 19 Miles Glendinning and Aonghus MacKechnie, *Scotch Baronial: Architecture and National Identity in Scotland* (London 2019), pp. 133-134. Graeme Morton, *Unionist-Nationalism. Governing Urban Scotland, 1830–1860* (East Linton, 1999).
- 20 Richard Saville, *Bank of Scotland; A History 1695–1995* (Edinburgh 1996).
- 21 Robert J. Morris, 'Photography, environment and "improvement" in Scottish Cities 1860–1900', in *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, tome 116, n°2. 2004. La culture scientifique à Rome à l'époque moderne. Pouvoir local et factions (XVe–XIXe siècle). Città e ambiente. Ospedali e sanità, pp. 787-795.

- 21 Robert J. Morris, *Scotland 1907: The Many Scotlands of Valentine and Sons Photographers* (Edinburgh 2007), p. 51.
- 22 Richard Rodger, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: Land, Property and Trust in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge 2001), p. 60-61.
- 23 Richard Rodger, 'Mobile City: Edinburgh as a Communications Hub, 1775-1825' in C. Godard Desmarest (ed.), *The New Town of Edinburgh: An Architectural Celebration* (Edinburgh 2019), pp. 128-46.
- 24 John C. Dunlop, A. Hay Dunlop, W. Hole and S. Mitchell, *The Book of Old Edinburgh, and Hand-Book to the Old Edinburgh Street, designed by S. Mitchell ... for the International Exhibition of Industry, Science, and Art, Edinburgh, 1886. With Historical Accounts of the Buildings therein Reproduced, and Anecdotes of Edinburgh Life in the Olden Times* (Edinburgh 1886), pp. 6-13.
- 25 Robert J. Morris, 'Ramsay Garden: "Professor Geddes's New Buildings"', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New series, vol. 10 (2014), pp. 107-26.
- 26 George Shaw Aitken, 'Lady Stair's House', *Transactions of the Edinburgh Architectural Association*, vol. 6 (1910), pp. 123-8; T. B. Whitson, 'Lady Stair's House', *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. 3 (1910), pp. 243-52.
- 27 Kirsten Carter McKee, *Calton Hill: "And the Plans for Edinburgh's Third New Town"* (Edinburgh 2018).
- 28 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Picturesque Notes - Edinburgh* (London 1903), pp. 13, 70, 78.
- 29 William Stark, *Report to the Right Honourable the Lord Provost, Magistrates, and Council of the City of Edinburgh, and the Governors of George Heriot's Hospital [...] On the Plans for Laying out the Grounds for Buildings between Edinburgh and Leith* (Edinburgh 1814), p. 14.
- 30 Thomas Hamilton, *Design for National Gallery and Royal Scottish Academy*, pen and ink, pencil and watercolour on paper, 1848 (Royal Scottish Academy). William Henry Playfair, *Design for National Gallery and Royal Scottish Academy on the Mound*, east elevation, 1848 (University of Edinburgh).
- 31 Matthew Williams, 'Planning for the Picturesque: Thomas Hamilton's New Roads to the Old Town, 1817-1858', *Architectural Heritage*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2009, pp. 33-53.
- 32 Matthew Williams, 'Planning for the Picturesque', p. 37.
- 33 City of Edinburgh Council, Planning Committee, *Skyline Report: The Protection of Key Views*, 19 June 2008.
- 34 'Mountain Moor and Loch' Illustrated by Pen and Pencil, *on the Route of the West Highland Railway with 230 Illustrations from Original Drawings on the Spot* (London 1894), p. 19.
- 35 The Half-Moon Battery was built round the lower floors of David's Tower in 1573-88.
- 36 John Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* (New Haven 1984), pp. 93-4.
- 37 West Princes Street Gardens, on the west side of the Mound, were designed and landscaped by James Skene in 1816 as private gardens for the residents of Princes Street.
- 38 For an account of Edinburgh Castle's nineteenth century history see Robert Morris, 'Edinburgh Castle and the Re-making of Medieval Edinburgh', in Audrey Dakin et al (eds.), *Scotland's Castle Culture* (Edinburgh 2011), pp. 280-79.
- 39 Clarisse Godard Desmarest, 'Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg's entry into Edinburgh, 1819', *History Scotland*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020, pp. 8-10.
- 40 Thomas H. Shepherd, *Modern Athens or Edinburgh in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1831). Shepherd also produced engravings of London, *Metropolitan Improvement of London in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1827).
- 41 Waterloo Place forms the link between Princes Street and Regent Road, and is carried by Regent Bridge.
- 42 *Address from the Town Council of Edinburgh on the Subject of the New Buildings for the High School of Which the Foundation was Laid on 28 July 1825* (Edinburgh, 1825), p. 2.
- 43 See <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/466058>
- 44 Robert J. Morris and Richard Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City; A Reader in British Urban History, 1820-1914* (London and New York 1993), p. 8.
- 45 In reality, the New College twin steeples are fractionally, almost unperceptively, off-alignment with the steeple of Victoria Hall. An architect's project drawing which appears to be by Playfair, and currently (2019) hanging in the entrance hall of New College, confirms the intention had been to enframe it absolutely precisely.
- 46 J. Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh*, p. 289.
- 47 Robert J. Morris, 'Philanthropy and Poor Relief in 19th Century Edinburgh. The Example of a Capital City without a National State Government' in *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, tome 111, n°1. 1999, pp. 367-79, p. 379.
- 48 City Art Centre, item number 20689.
- 49 See Joseph Ebsworth's north view of Edinburgh taken from the Scott Monument (City Art Centre).
- 50 Clarisse Godard Desmarest, 'The Melville Monument and the Shaping of the Scottish Metropolis', *Architectural History*, vol. 61, 2018, pp. 105-30.
- 51 'The Edinburgh North British Railway Hotel', *The Scotsman*, 16 February 1895, p. 10.
- 52 'The Edinburgh North British Railway Hotel', *The Scotsman*, 16 February 1895, p. 10.
- 53 'The Edinburgh North British Railway Hotel, Edinburgh', *The Scotsman*, 14 October 1902, p. 5.
- 54 Graeme Morton, *Unionist-Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860* (East Linton, 1999).