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A RARE SURVIVAL – THE WHIN CLUB BOX

JILL TURNBULL

THE PROLIFERATION of clubs in eighteenth and nineteenth century Scotland has been well documented but, with a few notable exceptions, the artefacts associated with them are less well known. The nature of the clubs varied widely, some having a political, literary or occupational bias, others being entirely social in aim and nature, many of them facetious and jokey in character. An article written by Harry Cockburn in 1910 describes ten of the better known Edinburgh clubs in some detail and lists 21 others.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest was the Whin-Bush Club, the subject of a poem by Allan Ramsay, published between 1721 and 1728. Robert Chambers in his *Traditions of Edinburgh*, first published in 1824, also describes in some detail, and in a tone of disapproving bemusement, the history and membership of a variety of clubs, many of their titles derived from ‘in jokes’, like the Spendthrift Club, whose members had to spend at least fourpence halfpenny a night.<sup>2</sup>

Whether formed like the Poker Club for an originally serious underlying purpose — ‘to stir up their compatriots to demand for Scotland equal powers with England in the matter of raising a regular militia’ — or with the intentionally frivolous aim of meeting every night to eat pies — the Pious Club — social drinking and dining was their basic *raison d’être*.<sup>3</sup> The clubs usually met in taverns like Fortune’s, which was originally in the Old Town and later sited in Princes Street. Members of the Whin Club, the subject of this article, also met there, as well as at Oman’s Hotel in West Register Street, and ‘McIntosh’s’ (address not identified).

Some club regalia survives and is publicly accessible. The velvet cap and ‘pokers’, used in the initiation ceremony of the Cape Club, are displayed in the Museum of Scotland, as are a silver token and wooden snuff box, insignia of the Skate Club, whose members met to eat skate wings.<sup>4</sup> Since drinking was the most significant activity of all the clubs, it is not

surprising that some at least should have owned their own glasses, although relatively few appear to have survived. Cockburn records that the Marrow Bone Club glasses were engraved with their crest and motto.<sup>5</sup> Surviving club glasses of the notoriously salacious Beggar’s Benison are well documented, as well as drinking glasses enameled with a phallus and, in one case at least, the castle and anchor crest of Edinburgh (punch bowls similarly decorated are also known).<sup>6</sup>

The club discussed in this paper is a small, apparently unknown, and much more modest (in all senses) Edinburgh social club, which was established on 18 May 1799 by a group of young lawyers, with the active encouragement of four young women, all from lawyers’ families. The unique aspect of this club is the survival of their club box and its contents, as well as some informative documentary material, consisting of two lists of members, two small envelopes, a letter in duplicate and a small green booklet dated September 1859 and inscribed ‘Extracted from Minute Book’. It is on that material that this paper is based.

No link has been found with Allan Ramsay’s Whin-Bush Club, which was founded by men from Clydesdale some 70 years earlier. It seems likely that, in the case of the Whin Club at least, the name was chosen for the symbolism of the evergreen, and traditionally always in bloom, whin or gorse. This was reflected in their motto *Semper Viret* (*semper* — always; *viret* from *virere* — to be green, to flourish). It was certainly an appropriate symbol for a group of young men at the start of their careers.

Some of the surviving papers appear to date from the early days of the Whin Club, others seem to be explanatory notes written later. A small envelope addressed to ‘Thos & John Tod Esqrs of the S.W.C.’, for example, contains a note saying ‘From the Ladies of the Select Whin Club, with their best Compliments. Wednesday May 22nd ’99’. Then

follows a list of four 'Ladies' and ten 'Gentlemen'. Now empty apart from the note, it may well have contained what is described on another sheet of paper as 'The original Whin Club insignia from the ladies May 1799, John Tod'. This was probably the small gold medlet suspended on a yellow silk ribbon, which remains in the club box. Engraved on it are the initials 'LWC', presumably standing for Ladies' Whin Club. The ladies listed were:

Miss Eliza Pringle.

Miss Marg. Pringle, who had died before the list was written.

Miss Mary Pringle.

Miss Tod, 'now Mrs Selkraig'.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth and Mary Pringle were the daughters of Sir James Pringle of Stichell and Elizabeth McLeod. Elizabeth married Archibald Tod of Drygrange WS, elder brother of Whin Club members John and Thomas Tod, at St Cuthberts, Edinburgh in 1802.<sup>8</sup> Mary married George Baillie of Jerviswood in 1801.<sup>9</sup> 'Margaret' is more problematic. Elizabeth and Mary Pringle had a sister Margaret, who was born in 1776, but there was also a Margaret Pringle, daughter of Robert Pringle, Senator of the College of Justice, who died unmarried in 1834. 'Miss Tod' was Jane Tod, who married Charles Selkraig, an Edinburgh accountant, in 1807. Clearly the young women were members of a close circle of friends of both sexes from similar backgrounds. It has not been possible to trace Jane Tod, but it would be reasonable to assume that she was related to the Tod brothers.

The club was to consist of twelve male members, although initially there were only eleven, and four others were admitted at various times subsequently. The four young women were also listed as members on one of the surviving papers, and were clearly very much involved with at least some aspects of the club in its early years. It seems unlikely, however, that their involvement would have continued after their marriages to men who were not club members. Peter Lole, in an article on 'Clubs and their Glass in the Eighteenth Century', writes that 'although some Clubs nominally had women members, they often were constrained', although he does add that 'in a few cases women had true equality of membership'.<sup>10</sup>

Not only were almost all the Whin Club men lawyers, they were also all in their twenties, virtually every one of them having been born in the 1770s, as had the young women. Most of them were to die in the 1850s, many after very successful careers.<sup>11</sup> The male members were:

John Fullerton, advocate (1775–1853), second son of William Fullerton of Carstairs, who married, on 30 September 1817, Georgina Hay, daughter of James Mcdowall, auditor of Excise. Fullerton was elevated to the Bench on 17 February 1829.

John Ouchterlong of G (Auchterlony?).<sup>12</sup>

John Ferrier WS (1771–1852), eldest son of James Ferrier WS, married 4 May 1804, Margaret, daughter of John Wilson, merchant in Paisley. He became Deputy Keeper of the Great Seal.

Louis Henry Ferrier of Belsyde, advocate (1776–1833), son of Major General Ilay Ferrier, Scots Brigade, married, 10 November 1808, Charlotte, daughter of Dr Alexander Monro of Craiglockhart. Ferrier was appointed Commissioner of Customs in 1810 and later moved to Quebec.

Thomas Tod, advocate (1771–1850), second son of Thomas Tod WS, became Judge of the Commissary Court on 24 January 1807.

John Tod WS (1773–1856), son of Thomas Tod WS, married, 9 April 1808, Helen, daughter of Alexander Duff of Hatton, Aberdeenshire. Made a director of the Bank of Scotland in 1819.

George Ross of Woodburn, advocate (1775–1861), third son of Admiral Sir John Lockhart Ross of Balnagowan, married, 27 June 1808, Grace, daughter of Rev. Andrew Hunter of Barjarg. He was Advocate Depute 1803–06, and became a Judge of the Commissary Court on 12 June 1813.

James Elliott of Wolflee WS (1772–1855), youngest son of Cornelius Elliott WS, married, (1) 9 September 1799, Caroline, daughter of Walter Hunter of Polmoed(?), Peeblesshire, and (2) 17 January 1827, Margaret, daughter of Robert Davidson of Roxburghshire.

Reginald (Ranald) Macdonald of Staffa, advocate (1777–1838): Sir Reginald Macdonald Seton Stuart of Allanton, son of Colin Macdonald of Boisdale, married, 23 January 1812, Elizabeth Margaret, only child and heiress of Sir Henry

Steuart of Allanton, whose name he assumed and to whose baronetcy he succeeded. He was Sheriff of Stirlingshire from 1811 until his death in 1838.

Adam Duff of Findon, advocate (?-1840), third son of Robert Duff of Logie and Fetteresso, Vice Admiral of the Red. He was Sheriff of Forfar 1807-19, and of Midlothian 1819-40.

Robert Hunter of Marston.

Sir Thomas Carmichael was made an honorary member (1805).

Captain James Ross of Invercauld elected a member (1807).

Robert Cockburn elected a member (1808).

Adam Ferguson of Woodhill (1809). Advocate (?-1862), eldest son of Neil Ferguson of Pitcullo, married, (1) 26 November 1811, Jemima Johnston Blair, and (2) 7 May 1833, Jessy, daughter of George Tower, merchant in Aberdeen.

The surviving extracts, which were copied, or summarised, from the club minutes in 1859, provide details of the members' activities and acquisitions. John Tod was treasurer and secretary, but he was joined by Adam Duff as an assistant in 1818, because Tod was 'sometimes remiss in calling meetings of the Club'.

The annual membership subscription was set at £2. 2. 0. As well as attending the regular meetings to be held on the first Saturday of March, 18 May and 2 December each year, it was agreed that a member 'getting any appt. above £26 yearly, shall give a dinner to the Club'. The records show that celebratory dinners were, indeed, given by Louis Ferrier in 1810, and by Thomas Tod and George Ross to celebrate their elevation to judges. Reginald Macdonald of Staffa followed suit on 19 June 1812, to mark his appointment as Sheriff of Stirlingshire, and in 1819 John Tod similarly celebrated his appointment as a director of the Bank of Scotland.<sup>13</sup>

In 1802 each member subscribed five guineas with which madeira and 'Magnums and Common Bottles of Claret' were bought and kept in John Ferrier's cellar in George Street, '& sent as required wherever the Club met'. In 1823 members resolved 'to exchange some of their 1802 Claret for other wines & did so, sending the Hock & Sherry as before to John Ferrier's Cellar & the Claret, but the Champagne to be kept at Robert Cockburns at Leith,

& get fresh as wanted'. The members' capacity for alcohol had obviously diminished by 1834, because they resolved 'to divide their remaining wine as it was getting too old, & so little now consumed & on 30th March it was divided accordingly among the members'.

The Whin Club members not only ate and drank well — they also gambled. In March 1801 the Club bought a ticket in the State Lottery, and they met 'at whatever place was named by the Croupier of the previous Meeting. The President of the day named his Croupier, who in turn was President at the next meeting'. The losses sustained by the members were, however, 'for the use of the Club', the heaviest being half a hogshead of claret lost by John Ferrier and Reginald Macdonald in 1803, although the debt was not paid until 1828.

Although, so far as is known, the original minute book does not survive, the drinking apparatus of the Whin Club, together with the Club box, is still owned by descendants of one of the original members, George Ross (fig. 1). Fortunately, as well as the objects themselves, details of their presentation to the Club were recorded by their later guardian in the extracts that he copied from the minutes.

In June 1810, after eleven years of existence, the minutes record that John Ouchterlong presented the Club with two dozen wine glasses and two decanters on which 'the emblem of the Club (Whin Bush) & the Initials of Members are engraved'. At the March meeting in 1812, the Club met in Leith where Adam Duff presented a mahogany box to hold the glasses, as well as six bottles of wine, as he had come into a small legacy. At the same meeting Robert Cockburn provided a 'Singleton's' corkscrew, John Ferrier gave a silver wine filter and stand, and 'McDonald of Staffa presented a Crystal Dram Bottle, & Highland Whisky' (fig 2).

Almost 200 years later, that box, carefully designed to accommodate all the glass and other items in baize-lined padded compartments, and bearing a brass plaque engraved with the Club device and motto, still holds much of the original material, although some of the wine glasses are missing, while others have been replaced. In addition to the objects listed above, there is a gadget with a knife blade at one end and a stiff brush at the other for use before employment of the corkscrew.



Fig. 1. The interior of the Whin Club box, carefully designed so that the contents could be carried safely to meetings. (Photograph, National Museums of Scotland, Neg. no. 36074.)

The surviving wine glasses are of two sizes and, significantly, the box is designed to accommodate twenty-four larger and six smaller glasses. Only two dozen glasses were presented by John Ouchterlong and it seems likely that they were destined for use by the men, while the smaller ones were for the lady members. The donor of the four surviving small glasses is unknown. All the glasses are of the same simple drawn trumpet shape, with shallow cut flutes running from the bowl down the stem. Each of them is decorated round the rim with a band of engraved dot and leaf pattern. The Club insignia are engraved on the body of each glass, on one side the motto *Semper Viret* over a whin bush, on the other a dated 'belt' surrounding the cypher 'WC' (fig. 3). Ten bear the date of the foundation of the Club, 18 May 1799, three are dated December 1800, and the remainder

December 1860 — eleven years after the Club's demise. It is no surprise that there should be later replacements, since the glasses have been in use by the owners for special occasions until very recently. Even those glasses bearing the date 1799 may not have been made in 1810, however, since the minutes record that in 1825 the Club asked Robert Cockburn to have the broken glasses replaced by new ones. Whatever the actual date of production, it seems certain that the original design was replicated.

The two decanters, the stoppers for which are missing, are of tapering mallet shape, with a fluted base and neck, and three neck rings (fig. 4). Round the shoulders are fourteen cut roundels or 'printies', two bearing the Club insignia, the others engraved with the initials of each of the Club members. One of the decanters bears twelve initials, on the other only

THE WHIN CLUB BOX



Fig. 2. The contents of the box. (NMS, Neg. no. 36076.)

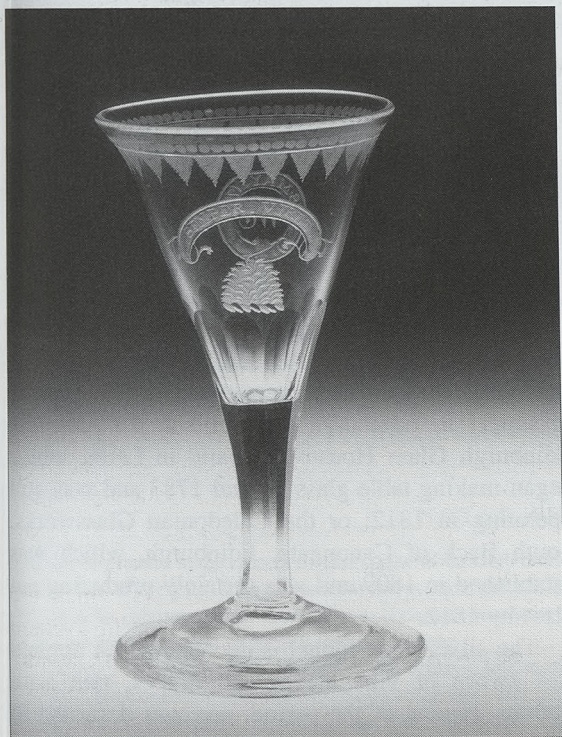


Fig. 3. A Whin Bush wine glass, showing the motto *Semper Viret* over a whin bush. (NMS, Neg. no. 36083-1.)

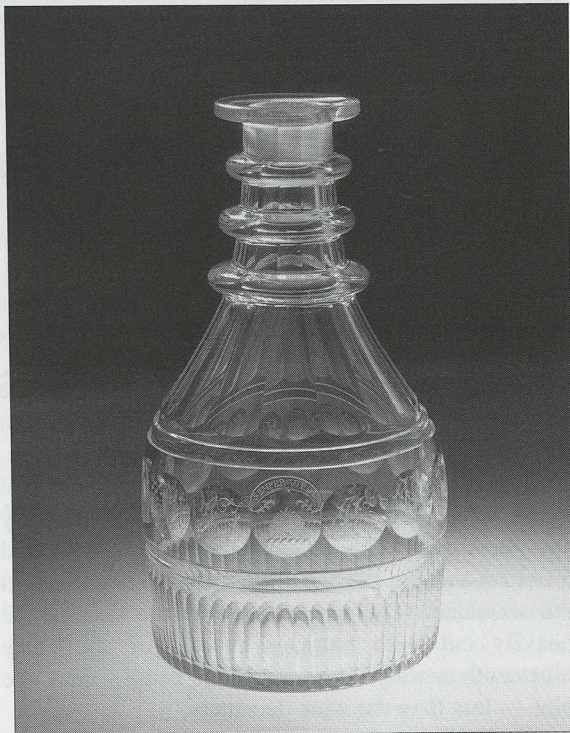


Fig. 4. One of the wine decanters. (NMS, Neg. no. 36083-11.)



Fig. 5. Members' initials engraved on 'printies' round the shoulder of a decanter. (NMS, Neg. no. 36081-7.)

three of the spaces have been used. All but one of the monograms tally with the list of Club members, but the owner of the initials 'DMB' is unknown (fig. 5).

The 'Crystal Dram' whisky bottle is of an unusual shape, with a rectangular star-cut base, a squat body and short neck. The small flat stopper is engraved STAFFA and the Whin Club motifs are engraved on the shoulders. The whole body of the decanter is heavily cut with patterns typical of the early nineteenth century. Spirit decanters usually held one pint — less than the wine decanters.

There is no indication in the records of where the glass was made, but it seems probable that it was

produced locally. There were two possible sources of supply in Edinburgh and Leith at the time; the Edinburgh Glass House Company in Leith, which began making table glass around 1783 and was still operating in 1812; or the Caledonian Glassworks, South Back of Canongate, Edinburgh, which was established in 1809 and was certainly producing cut glass by 1812.

The silver wine funnel is decorated with applied cast swags of vine leaves and grapes, tied with ribbons, typical of the period, and was designed to hold a muslin filter to remove the wine lees as it was poured. It is accompanied by a plain stand. The

funnel is engraved with the usual device and the Club initials and belt dated 18 May 1799, but also bears the monogram 'JF' — that of the presenter John Ferrier. The funnel was made by George Fenwick, an Edinburgh silversmith. There were, in fact, two George Fenwicks, father and son, working at about the same time. George Fenwick senior was admitted master of the Incorporation of Goldsmiths in 1811 and became a burghess of the city in 1813. His son followed suit in 1819, but died in Tobago only two years later. Their work was prolific and sometimes unconventional, often displaying bold designs made with heavy gauge metal.

The matching silver handles of the corkscrew and cork knife, which bear applied shields engraved with the Whin Club emblems, were made by another Edinburgh silversmith, John McDonald, who assayed silver in Edinburgh between 1799 and 1828.<sup>14</sup> The iron corkscrew itself was described as a 'Singleton's' in the Club minutes. It is of typical early nineteenth century design and is unmarked, but there may have been some connection with a Richard Singleton, cutler and corkscrew maker of Dublin, who was active between the 1750s and 1790s. Clearly it was a name of sufficient significance to be recorded in the minutes. The knife blade was again of local make, and is impressed with the cutler's mark 'Boog', probably for the Edinburgh cutlers Andrew and Alexander Boog. It was designed for cutting away the wax seal which covered the cork, while the stiff brush at the opposite end was available for removing dust and pieces of wax before the bottle was uncorked, with due ceremony.

By the end of the 1840s most of the surviving members were in their seventies and in 1849, fifty

years after its inception, the Whin Club was finally brought to an end. The Club box was given into the care of George Ross by Mrs Tod, whose husband John, although still alive, was presumably not able to do so himself. In a touching letter, dated 20 October 1849, Ross expressed his sadness and promised to take great care of 'this Memorial'. He wrote, on black-edged paper:

My dear Mrs Tod,

I was not a little vexed this evening in carrying off the Pedlar's Box. I know that it told of pleasant days gone by, and I did not like to be the Bearer away of this Memorial of those days. If, however it would please you and Mr Tod to know that this thief is proud of his treasure, be assured, that it is so. I prize it most highly, and if a poor man may be allowed such a boast, I would not part with it for a thousand pounds. After examining its contents with great care, and making my self master of its many intricacies, I have sat and watched it for some minutes back, as if it were a thing that could speak. It told me of the past and I had thought of the future, when it shall have ceased to be mine, and become the property of another. As long as it is mine, it shall speak to me of nothing but what is pleasant, for it shall speak to me of yourself and Mr Tod and in after years, should any occasion arise for peculiar festivity, the Pedlar's Box shall be brought out, and in my eyes be the greatest ornament I shall be able to display. Tell Mr Tod, please, how much I value it, and believe me ever

Yours very affectionately,

George Ross.

George Ross died on 17 March 1861. There is no mention in his will of the Whin Club box, nor of any other artefacts.<sup>15</sup> His house and lands of Woodburn at Canaan, Morningside, were left to his wife, and generous provision was made for his three daughters, three sons, and two grandchildren.

No doubt he, the Tods, and the other Whin Club members, would be gratified to know that their 'Pedlar's Box' and its contents are still treasured by the descendants of one of their founding members.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am most grateful to the current owners of the Whin Club box for permission to use their archival material and to have the box and its contents photographed, and to the National Museums of Scotland for permission to publish the photographs.

1 Harry A. Cockburn, 'An Account of the Friday Club, written by Lord Cockburn, together with Notes on certain other social Clubs in Edinburgh', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*,

Original Series 3 (1910), pp. 105–178.

2 Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1824), II, pp. 242–264; see also new edn (Edinburgh 1868), pp. 164–173.

3 Cockburn, 'Friday Club', p. 177.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–163.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 174–175.



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- 6 David Stevenson, *The Beggar's Benison: Sex Clubs of Enlightenment Scotland and their Rituals* (East Linton 2001).
- 7 A second list is slightly at variance, saying 'Mrs.' Tod.
- 8 There are a number of lawyers called Pringle in the lists of Advocates and Writers to the Signet. A second list headed 'Members of the said Club' includes 'Miss Eliza Pringle (Stickell), and Mr. Tod, Drygrange', implying that Archibald Tod was also a member of the club, but he is not listed as a member elsewhere.
- 9 The second list says 'Mary Pringle, now Mrs Ballard', although it clearly says 'now Mrs Baillie' in the list accompanying the insignia mentioned above.
- 10 Peter Lole, 'Clubs and their Glass in the Eighteenth Century', *The Glass Circle Journal*, 9 (2001), pp. 7-27.
- 11 Information on the members obtained from Sir Francis J. Grant (ed.), *The Faculty of Advocates in Scotland, 1532-1943* (Edinburgh 1944), and *Register of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet* (Edinburgh 1983).
- 12 No information has been found about 'John Ouchterlong'. It is possible that he was, in fact, John Auchterlony, shown in the 1799-1800 Edinburgh *Directory* as residing at 30 North Castle Street.
- 13 Extracted Minutes.
- 14 I am grateful to George Dalgleish, senior curator at the National Museums of Scotland, for information on the silversmiths and cutler.
- 15 National Archives of Scotland, SC70/4/75.