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# A CENTENARY RE-CREATION OF AN OLD EDINBURGH CLUB COUNCIL RITUAL

GRAEME CRUICKSHANK

A NUMBER of well publicised events were held during the course of 2008 to celebrate the centenary of the founding of the Old Edinburgh Club. By contrast, a lesser event took place with no publicity, yet which might be worth recording in the annals of the Club. This was a regular meeting of the OEC Council, which had two rather irregular features.

On 16 October 2008 the Council of the Club convened in the Oak Room of the John Knox House in the High Street. As well as being a wonderfully atmospheric location, and a most fitting venue for the conduct of business concerned with Old Edinburgh, this was an especially appropriate moment for the Council of the Club to be there, for it was in that building, and probably in that very room,

that the concept of an Old Edinburgh Club was nurtured and brought to fulfilment. The man responsible more than any other was William J. Hay, who was custodian of the John Knox House and curator of the Museum there, and who provided the venue for the five meetings of the steering committee which led to the formal establishment of the Club in the City Chambers on 29 January 1908.<sup>1</sup> It was therefore highly appropriate that the Club's Council should return to its roots in its centenary year. This was made possible by the kind co-operation of custodian Moira Hay (no relation of the founder) to whom we are duly grateful.

The other unusual feature of that Council meeting was an attempt to re-create a ritual which had taken place at the first formal meeting of the OEC Council

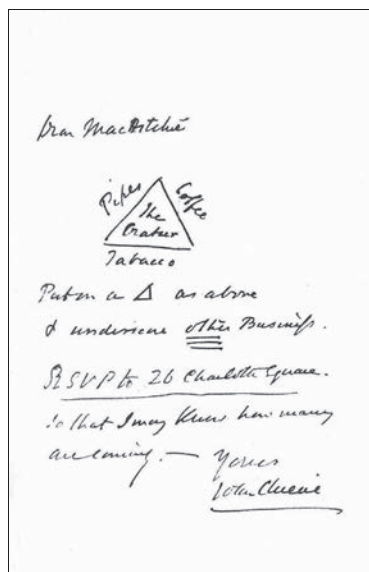


Fig. 1. Draft for the hand-written sections of the printed Notice calling the first meeting of the Council of the Old Edinburgh Club. (Courtesy of Edinburgh City Libraries.)

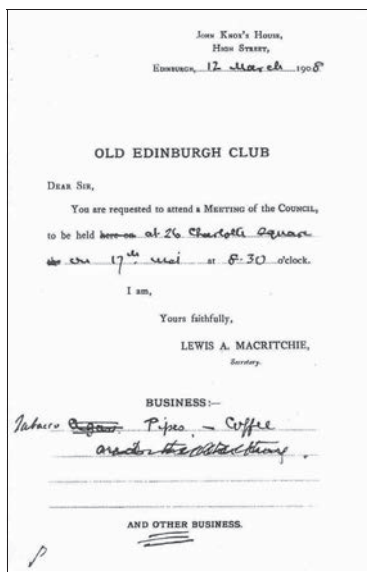


Fig. 2. Printed Notice calling the first meeting of the Council of the OEC, with hand-written insertions, at what appears to be an intermediate stage. (Edinburgh City Libraries.)

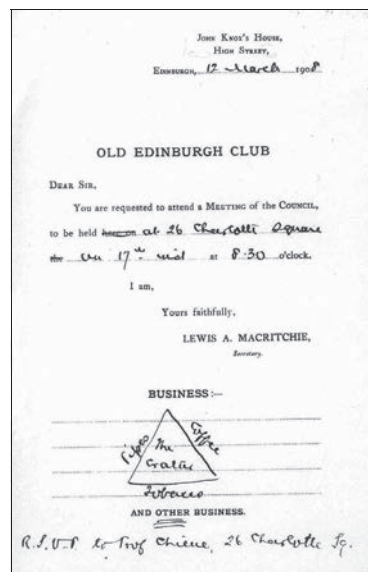


Fig. 3. Printed Notice calling the first meeting of the Council of the OEC, with hand-written insertions, in what appears to be the final form as distributed to members. (Edinburgh City Libraries.)

just over a century earlier. The notion stemmed from the discovery of a somewhat cryptic item of ephemera contained in the Club's first 'Minute Book', which is now lodged in the Edinburgh Room of the Central Public Library. This is a fascinating source which a number of Club members utilised in the centenary year, though it is somewhat misnamed, so it may be helpful to list its contents:

1. The manuscript minutes of the five meetings of the steering group, known as the Provisional Committee, which led to the Club's formation, which were held in December 1907 and January 1908;
2. A variety of press cuttings relating to the Club's formation;
3. Various items of printed ephemera relating to the Club's formation and early activities;
4. A variety of lengthy press cuttings reporting on the Club's first AGM;
5. A notice and extensive press accounts of the Club's opening lecture in its second session;
6. Extensive press reviews of the initial volume of the *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* in March 1909;
7. A variety of press notices and reports of Club outings in the summer of 1909;
8. A manuscript list of members (298), associates (20, a number of whom later became members), honorary associates (2), and institutional members, i.e. libraries (18).

This collection of material provides many fascinating slants on the Club in its early days, though the whereabouts of the first formal Minute Book of the OEC Council remains unknown. Perhaps it would solve the mystery of the ritual which was performed at that first meeting – then again, perhaps not.

Within the volume described above, there are three curious items relating to the first meeting of the Council following the Club's formation, to be held on 17 March 1908. The first is a hand-written note about the notice calling the meeting (fig. 1). The second is a printed form with manuscript additions, apparently in two hands (fig. 2). The third is the final notice issued by, and bearing the name of, Lewis MacRitchie, the Club's Secretary (fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> He was soon to transact his Club responsibilities from his business address of 40 Princes Street, but this notice carries the old administrative address of John

Knox's House. A hand-written insert called for the Council meeting to be held not there (even though William Hay sat on the inaugural Council) but at the home of the newly elected Club President, Professor John Chiene. This apparently represents a change of plan, and fairly last-minute at that, considering that the printed notice originally gave the place of meeting as 'here', i.e. John Knox House.

Chiene lived in Charlotte Square – a popular place for members of his profession, it would seem, as he had been preceded by James Syme (1836–47) at No. 9, and followed by Francis Caird (1900–22) at No. 13, all three of them professors of surgery at Edinburgh University at one time or another. Chiene had moved into No. 26 in 1885; shortly after the Council meeting there, referred to above, he removed to 21 Alva Street.<sup>3</sup> Following the end of the Chiene occupancy, the Charlotte Square property was taken over by Dalgleish, Dobbie & Co., solicitors, also acting as the administrative base for the Scottish Fish Oil and Guano Co. Ltd.<sup>4</sup> It is currently occupied by the National Trust for Scotland, being part of their administrative headquarters, which extends through Nos 22 to 26, but any hopes of recreating the centenary ritual at the place where it had actually occurred were thwarted by the present usage of No. 26, it being a fairly congested office area unsuited as a venue for a dozen or more people to gather.

The documents illustrated here clearly indicate that the hand-written inserts made by MacRitchie in the printed notice as circulated represent no more than his faithful following of instructions issued to him by Chiene (fig. 1). The latter's original manuscript version included the labelled diagram and the instructions to 'put in a  $\Delta$  as above & underscore other Business' [the word actually has triple underlining] and to add 'RSVP to 26 Charlotte Square so that I may know how many are coming'. As can be seen, the printed notice with hand-written insertions calling the meeting, issued on 12 March 1908, followed the manuscript draft to the letter (almost), and included the diagram which consisted of an equilateral triangle, accompanied by captions as drafted by Chiene (fig. 3). These referred to commodities which were apparently to be laid out both beside and within the triangle. Moving counter-clockwise from the apex, to the left of it there were to be 'Pipes', below it 'Tabacco' [*sic*], on the right

‘Coffee’, and in the centre ‘The Cratur’. That latter word is simply Scots for ‘creature’ – except when it is accompanied by the definite article, when it means whisky. Neither the nature of the triangle nor its significance is explained, nor alluded to in any way, though the triple underlining of ‘other’ preceding ‘business’ indicates that it represented something very out of the ordinary, and that it was an element in the conduct of the meeting to which the President attached considerable importance. It seems odd, then, that on what appears to be an early draft filling-out of the printed form, apparently in the hand of the Secretary (fig. 2), the phrase ‘and the cratur’ written on the second line below ‘Business’ was deleted. Even more odd is the deletion of the first word on the line above, which was replaced by ‘Tabacco’ in the President’s hand; it appears to be something like ‘Agan’. Chiene’s manuscript diagram was copied exactly by MacRitchie over the top of the lines intended for the agenda (except that he corrected the misspelling of tobacco), the ‘other business’ being left unspecified, and the notice was duly circulated to members of Council.

Feeling that it would be in the spirit of the centenary celebrations, the writer of this article decided to recreate, as far as was practical, the ritual assemblage implied in Chiene’s sketch. Given that it was not feasible to attempt this in the original location, the Council meeting in the John Knox House seemed an appropriate setting considering that the 1908 notice bore that address. The task was then to gather the five ingredients detailed in the sketch (fig. 4).

1. *The Triangle*. This was decidedly the most tricky of the five. Leaving aside the mystery as to its purpose, what was it made of? Was it two- or three-dimensional? What was it called? It seemed vaguely reminiscent of a snooker rack, but there were problems in acquiring one which was suitable, as they are mostly made of plastic these days. Eventually one was obtained from a firm claiming to be Scotland’s largest supplier of snooker equipment, which was made of genuine wood and not unpleasing to the eye; the only slight drawback was the adhesive label which it bore, which proclaimed that it was ‘Made in Taiwan’! This would be an unlikely echo of the situation in 1908, but at least it looked the part.

2. *Pipes*. It was a lot easier to provide authentic examples of this component, given that the proximity of Tobacco in the diagram effectively ruled out anything connected with music, drainage, or the like. Clay smokers’ pipes were made by a number of Scottish works, both large and small, in their millions over a long period of time. An obvious choice of maker for this purpose would have been the renowned firm of Christie’s of Leith, but the two examples which were most readily available were by Glasgow makers, Thomas McLachlan and John Waldie & Co., both of whom were operating in the Calton area of the city in 1908.<sup>5</sup> The style of pipe known as a ‘cutty clay’, being considerably shorter than the traditional English ‘church-warden’ style with its long curved stem, which was also used in Scotland. However, it was not so prevalent as the cutty, which proved more popular because of the convenience of being able to be slipped easily into the hatband or breast pocket. Even so, for ceremonial purposes, the OEC Council is more likely to have employed an elaborately-carved meerschaum. It probably depended on whether one pipe was passed around, or each member had his own.

3. *Tobacco*. No great problem here either, though there seemed to be a certain appeal in avoiding the mass-produced commodity stocked by retailers in



Fig. 4. Attempted reconstruction of the components of the ritual ceremony conducted at the first meeting of the Council of the Old Edinburgh Club, as indicated on the notice calling the meeting. (Photograph by Colin Warwick.)

this country and go straight to a natural source. The writer therefore plucked a tobacco leaf from the field at the bottom of his mother-in-law's garden in the province of Phetchaboon in central Thailand (where tobacco is the principal cash crop). This led to some practical problems, however, due to size of the leaves of the tobacco plant, which on average measure some 30 inches in length and 14 inches in width. Added to that, they become extremely friable once they dry out (which is why they are normally sprinkled with water at regular intervals, including at night, until they go for processing). It was therefore a lot more practical to bring to the Council meeting a folded tracing of a leaf rather than the real thing. In an attempt to restore a touch of reality, the tracing was put in a genuine tobacco jar of the period, of the kind made by a number of stoneware potteries in Scotland, e.g. by Buchan of Portobello (dip-glazed, sometimes utilising the Rockingham variety which gives a deep brown glossy finish), and also by several in Glasgow, such as those of Grosvenor (Eagle), Murray (Caledonian), and the Port-Dundas Pottery, in which salt-glazing was commonly employed. Such a receptacle often has the advantage of showing a smoker in action, puffing on his cutty, with a plume of smoke issuing from his mouth (fig. 5). Changes were made, however, when it came to producing a photograph of this set-up. The large size of the tracing of the leaf made its inclusion quite impractical, and so the shredded remains of the actual desiccated leaf have been used instead (which appear at the front of the shot: fig. 4). Also, the tobacco jar has been dispensed with – these jars were for commercial rather than social or domestic use, and it is unlikely that such an item would have appeared on the table at an OEC Council meeting.

4. *Coffee*. Easy enough today, but what about in 1908, when coffee was much more of an exotic commodity? Rather than plunk down a supermarket jar of some well known brand, the chosen sample was contained in a vividly-decorated packet acquired by the writer while living in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. This has been supplanted for the purpose of the photograph because of the anachronism of its vacuum packaging, being replaced by a more ethnic storage vessel as used at the place of growth – a section of hollow bamboo,

decorated with traditional motifs applied by the technique of pyrography. The coffee and its container were acquired by the writer while travelling in the Highlands of Tana Toraja, in central Sulawesi in Indonesia (or Celebes in the East Indies as it was known in 1908). It would indeed be interesting to know the source of the coffee enjoyed by the OEC Council members back then, by which time it had replaced tea as a luxury beverage.<sup>6</sup>

5. *The Cratur*. The easiest of all to replicate, and with no shortage of choice. A prime Scottish malt was selected, and presented in a cut crystal decanter.

The setting was now complete; the tobacco was not ignited, but the whisky was consumed with gusto, the toast being to William Hay, proposed by the President. The assembled company was left to ponder exactly what ritual was performed around the triangle by their OEC Council predecessors in 1908.



Fig. 5. Portrait of a man on a stoneware tobacco jar smoking a 'cutty' (short-stemmed clay pipe) which he is holding in his left hand, his tobacco pouch in his right, a plume of smoke issuing from his mouth, as manufactured by a number of Scottish potteries. (From Graeme Cruickshank, *Scottish Saltglaze*, *Scottish Pottery Studies No. 2*, Edinburgh 1982, fig. 3.)

## OLD EDINBURGH CLUB COUNCIL RITUAL

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 See Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Rosebery and the Birth of the Old Edinburgh Club', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, New Series 7 (2008), pp. 3–41; Graeme Cruickshank, 'William J. Hay (1863–1955), Founder of the Old Edinburgh Club: A Biographical Note', *Scottish Local History*, No. 75 (2009), pp. 29–37.
- 2 This latter notice was illustrated by Owen Dudley Edwards in his article in *BOECNS* 7 (2008), fig. 9 on page 18.
- 3 This was right next door to George Chiene (surely a close relative), who was an assistant then a lecturer in surgery at the University, who had moved into 23 Alva Street in 1902, having shared 26 Charlotte Square with John Chiene the previous year.
- 4 Information on addresses and dates from the *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directories*.
- 5 Information on location and date from the *Glasgow Post Office Directories*.
- 6 A total of 91 tea and coffee merchants are listed in the *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory* for 1908, but only one incorporates the product into its name (tea), while in a few more cases this may be surmised by their Indian sounding names. None provides a whiff of coffee. There is one firm which does, however – the Dry Extract of Coffee Co. Ltd, manufacturers of pure extracts of coffee and roasters of coffee, which had its works at 4 Elder Street.