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# THE OLD EDINBURGH CLUB CENTENARY CONFERENCE: PRESIDENT'S REMARKS

IAIN GORDON BROWN

## PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION

**M**Y LORDS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: welcome to our Centenary Conference.

The year 1908 saw three events of varied note. The Territorial Army was established, *The Wind in the Willows* was published, and the Old Edinburgh Club was founded. This last has proved to be a rather safer part-time occupation than the first – be grateful that you are here, secure in the heart of the New Town, and not called-up and under fire in Helmand Province, Afghanistan – and less whimsical than the second, though we may paraphrase Ratty in declaring that there is nothing, simply nothing, better than messing about in local history. For Ratty's 'boats' read 'books', and more specifically our own remarkable forty-two volumes of *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*.

As today progresses, let us keep in mind *The Wind in the Willows* and its anthropomorphism. It will be interesting to see if any of our speakers emerges as a mild Mole or a genial Water Rat, a gruff but stout-hearted Badger or an impulsive and irresponsible Mr Toad – the one who would doubtless exceed the allotted time for papers. All *The Wind in the Willows* protagonists are fine fellows in their different and distinctive ways, as indeed are our lecturers – among whose ranks I am aware of no tendencies towards the weasel, stoat or other nasty creatures of The Wild Wood. Maybe we can agree to think of Glasgow as our Wild Wood. We have made it less terrible by inviting to our Conference as guests representatives of the Old Glasgow Club, to which we concede seniority by some eight years.

Since its foundation in 1908 the Old Edinburgh Club has been a force for good in the life of this city. It began as a would-be conservation and heritage watchdog of a kind, designed to be a check on the

sometimes municipally-sponsored destruction of the historic heart of the city itself. Rapidly it found its true métier as the recorder, collector and above all publisher of the historical records of the city, its institutions, its localities and its inhabitants in all their aspects. Much of this early interest was of the somewhat coy 'homes and haunts' kind, and there was frequent use of the couthie word 'lore'. Nevertheless the Club undeniably helped to make the Old Town and its purlieus much better known and much more respected than before. Maybe, as a result of the Club's efforts, the streets and buildings of Old Edinburgh became somewhat less threatening to the douce and respectable middle-class of the city which also, unsurprisingly, furnished the Club with the overwhelming majority of its membership, dwellers mostly in the New Town or the genteel inner suburbs and spacious quarters of the Edinburgh villadom. In 1908 the Old Town was in sad and progressive decay. The Club helped to bring about change in the way this built heritage and its social history through time was regarded and guarded.

Societies such as this will never be properly understood by outsiders. I recall the sights that some of us witnessed in the streets when we held our reconstruction of the Club's first ever excursion, or ramble (as it was quaintly known at the time), round the walls of the city. The July evening was punctuated by the raucous screams of hen parties hanging out of the windows of their pink stretch limos, a-jeering and a-leering at us as we made our earnest way along. Principal subject of their attentions was our leader, Graeme Cruickshank, memorably clad in his bright-green 1970s tie-and-die suit from Bangkok. Had Robert Chambers been with us that night, the events of the evening, and most of all Graeme's extraordinary attire, would surely have become immortalised as one of the *Traditions of Edinburgh*. John Kay, too, might well have felt a portrait

coming on. What kind of a gathering did we appear to these hen-night revellers, these ‘Circes of the High Street’ gloaming, such as Scott mentions in *Waverley* as distractors of the innocent Jacobite soldiery after Prestonpans? A Club? Of what kind? Surely our sort of ‘clubbing’ was not familiar to them.

In this connection, I am reminded of the strange communication our Secretary recently received from a company that apparently offers its services to provide ‘entertainment’ of various kinds for Clubs and special occasions. They knew that we are a Club, and that we are celebrating a special occasion. Could they, perhaps, lay on for us a ‘wet tee-shirt’ competition or, alternatively, to provide for the pleasure and edification of the distaff side of our organisation, a ‘wet rugby-shorts’ competition organised on similar lines? Your Council feels that these events might most suitably take place toward the conclusion of our drinks reception tonight. Would-be contestants of either gender should present themselves for selection during the lunch interval.

No, societies such as this will never be properly understood by outsiders, and sometimes not even by those who should know better. The cover of our newly published volume of *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club* shows a rather uncomfortable group of members on an urban ramble in the summer of 1910. They huddle together, top-hatted, frock-coated, feather-boa’d, as if for mutual support and defence as they encounter, at the foot of Blackfriars Street at its junction with the nefarious Cowgate, a world very different from the respectability of the Morningside, Newington or Trinity from which they had temporarily emerged. In commenting on this photograph I have drawn attention to the gaggle of giggling girls on the edge of the OEC party, doubtless dragged along by their parents and speculating on how long such a boring association as this to which their elders belonged could possibly survive.

Twenty years or so later Miss Jean Brodie should have been a member of the OEC. Perhaps she was, and did not tell her girls. On the Brodie set’s famous walk through the Old Town the schoolmistress ‘talked of history’. You will remember that none of the girls had properly seen the heart of Old Edinburgh before, because ‘none of their parents was so historically minded as to be moved to conduct

their young into the reeking network of slums which the Old Town constituted in those years’. No OEC members among the parents of the Marcia Blaine School, then. Sandy Stranger thought the Old Town a foreign country. The Lawnmarket was the very seat of vice: ‘a misty region of crime and desperation’, Muriel Spark brands it in the novel. ‘Lawnmarket man jailed’, she writes in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, calling to mind some forgotten headline in the local newspaper. To me, ‘the Lawnmarket’ means the administrative building of the National Library of Scotland, so I had better not elaborate ...

Instead I shall say a word about our sponsors today. The concluding drinks reception is generously provided by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The original aims of the Club chimed well with those of RCAHMS, and with its continuing mission, especially in the work of the National Monuments Record which is a constituent part of the organisation. The Commission, too, is one hundred years old this year and enjoys world-wide prestige as one of the country’s great cultural institutions and most vital scholarly assets. It is the ideal sponsor for our Conference, and we thank warmly the Chairman, Professor John Hume, the Commissioners and the Secretary and Chief Executive, Mrs Diana Murray, for their support.

For some reason not many members of the Bar can be identified in the first membership lists of the Club. But now the Faculty of Advocates makes amends for any perceived early indifference by its very handsome sponsorship of this conference. Its support has made possible the hire of these opulent premises. We thank the Dean of Faculty, Richard Keen QC, and the Treasurer, Alan Dewar QC, for the unusual experience of allowing us to persuade lawyers to part with their own money.

It may also seem strange that the early membership of the Club was somewhat light in members of the medical profession. That we meet today in these august halls goes some way to righting another wrong, and that we have been able to do so on favourable terms is due to Professor David Purdie, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. Professor John Chiene, Fellow of the rival surgical college in Nicolson Street, was the Club’s first President. Writing in the second edition

of his volume of autobiographical reminiscence, *Looking Back*, published in 1908, Chiene said of the newborn OEC that 'I do hope we shall have many medico members to keep fresh the old Edinburgh heroes and their canny clubbable ways. We need them badly.' In David Purdie we have canny, even couthie, medical clubbability personified. Who needs other medicos if you have him? We shall have the pleasure of hearing him at the end of this morning's session. I trust that, as his subject is medical, he may remember that lunch immediately follows his talk, and that he will accordingly spare us too much blood, guts and infectious disease.

No conference ever, I suppose, has run quite to plan, despite the best efforts of its organisers. Professor Tom Devine finds himself at a family wedding and therefore cannot be here to give the final paper this afternoon, as originally advertised. While we regret Tom Devine's absence very much indeed we thank him nevertheless for his commendable restraint in not trying to insinuate all the West of Scotland wedding guests into our concluding drinks reception, which might just have been the alternative had we absolutely insisted on his honouring his commitment to us today. We are also grateful for his good offices in finding us an excellent substitute in the person of Professor Richard Finlay. Devine Intervention, you might call it, at its most effective.

When he spoke at our first Annual General Meeting, the Earl of Rosebery, our first Honorary President, expressed some surprise that the Club had not been in existence earlier, and voiced regret that this had not been the case. Indeed so; but surely he would have been pleased to think that, a century on, we flourish still. Today let us pay tribute to his memory. We had expected to welcome the Countess of Rosebery to our conference, and I had planned to ask her to carry home to Dalmeny our good wishes to Earl Archibald Philip's successor. However a domestic emergency in the form of the burglar alarm going off in the middle of the night, and the subsequent diversion provided by a bedroom full of policemen, has understandably altered her priorities. The fifth Earl of Rosebery it was who, as a young man, famously declared his ambitions as being to marry an heiress, to win the Derby and to become Prime Minister – *in that order*. He achieved all three. Significantly he did not include in his career wish-list the foundation of Edinburgh's leading local history

society, but that nevertheless remains one of his minor legacies to posterity.

We pay tribute, also to the memory of William Hay, tenant in 1908 of John Knox's House and proprietor of the publishing, print-selling and craft business cum local history emporium established there. Even more than the former Prime Minister was Hay our own prime begetter. The immediate cause of the Club's foundation was the concern of Hay and his small but worthy circle of friends among the Edinburgh bourgeoisie, matching that somewhat loftier and slightly more remote concern of the aristocratic Rosebery, at the alarming inroads made in the name of 'development' and 'progress' on the stock of historic old buildings in the High Street and its surroundings. This heritage had been seriously depleted in the preceding fifty years. Concern was matched by a feeling that something should be done to preserve what remained.

To back up this burgeoning concern for conservation causes the nascent Club saw its real function as being to collect and publish historical evidence and source-material. As the London magazine *The Athenaeum* put it, reporting the Club's conception and birth, this might be termed 'the gathering and preserving in a permanent form the lore of Edinburgh, written, oral and traditionary'. That, more or less, with some greater refinement and rather more scholarly sophistication than this metropolitan glance at 'North Britain' indicated was to be expected from the new society, that is what we have done for the past century, and shall continue to do while we have money and enthusiasm to go on producing our *Book*. In his address at that first Annual Meeting Lord Rosebery encouraged the membership to 'bear testimony on behalf of Antiquity'. That we have done, constantly and faithfully, over the past century. At a Centenary moment it is right and proper to look back; and so we do, in this our conference in which we examine development and change in many aspects of the life of our city over the past hundred years. But it is equally appropriate to look forward; and this we do too, in some measure, in our conference title of the *Once and Future Capital*.

Lord Rosebery's actual words were: 'It will be the task of the Club, in season and out of season, to bear testimony on behalf of Antiquity where it is threatened by an unnecessary development of

utility'. Delivered in the very heart of the City Chambers itself, this directive was coupled with the shaming plea that the City Council 'always respect the ancient monuments of this city'. The past, with all its destruction, could not be undone; but in future the city should look after its built heritage. 'Would that we were all enabled to realise more fully', Rosebery thundered, 'that it [the High Street] is a great civic possession and a great national trust – not merely "a happy hunting ground" for sanitary surveyors and utilitarian officials'.

After that tirade it is embarrassing to think that the City of Edinburgh was already then the Club's patron, as indeed it remains. All passion spent, we welcome this morning Councillor Dr Jenny Dawe, Leader of the Council. In doing so let us forget for a moment Rosebery's crusade against what he saw as mindless destruction and desecration. We are honoured by the City's patronage of our Club, and we thank the Council warmly for their support to us during this Centenary year.

I invite Dr Dawe, who has both humoured and honoured us by coming adorned with her gold Bailie's chain of office and with the City Officer as escort on this account, to say a few words on behalf of our patrons.

*Councillor Jenny Dawe spoke at this point, and was thanked for her words and asked to convey the greeting of the Conference to the Lord Provost and the whole City Council. The President then handed over to Ms Bridget Stevens who chaired the morning session.*

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

'Concluding Remarks', the programme says: in other words a rag-bag of a moment in which I must try to fit everything for which I could not find time in my rather breathless speech this morning. You heard quite enough from me earlier, you may feel; and I do not propose to detain you very much longer from the refreshments that await us and the lively conversation and questions that will doubtless be exchanged among delegates and speakers.

You will remember that I spoke this morning of the whimsical notion of amalgamating our drinks party with the putative Devine family wedding festivities. I must tell you that this afternoon there is

a real wedding reception in the College of Physicians hall adjoining this conference centre. I ask you to exercise restraint. No matter how worthy of unlimited celebration may be our Centenary, nor how enlivened may we all have become when deep in Royal Commission-funded drink, we must yet under no circumstances seek to insinuate ourselves into this jamboree even if we happen to feel that a couple of glasses of someone else's champagne would bring our own special day to an even jollier close.

What I do wish to do now is thank in your name the two Chairs of our sessions today, Bridget Stevens and Lord Cullen of Whitekirk. They have carried out their duties in an exemplary and most tactful way and we are very grateful for their conduct of their respective sessions. We did our best to keep them both away from their own areas of special interest and knowledge, so perversely Douglas Cullen had no oversight of a session that comprehended the Law, and Bridget Stevens was separated from control of that dealing with the Arts of Midlothian, and any possible connections they may have with Further and Continuing Education. Impartiality reigned, and all was handled with enormous discretion and tact. We thank them both.

Lord Cullen has juggled the demands of a difficult day which has included the funeral this morning of an old and distinguished friend. We are particularly grateful to him under the circumstances for honouring his commitment to us today. When our other chairperson goes home tonight to relax over a glass of chardonnay, perhaps, it may be that she will write up the latest page of Bridget Stevens's Diary. I imagine the entry reading something like this. 'OEC conference. Eight papers, all v.g. Excellent lunch. 2475 calories. Must go easy tomorrow. Wine reception, three units, or was it four ... V.v. good day ...'

Today's event has been a major effort for all of us on the Club's Centenary Committee. This began some three years or more ago with informal discussions between Tristram Clarke, Owen Dudley Edwards and myself. A Centenary Committee was subsequently established by Council. This has met regularly over the past many months. Though he has not actually served formally on this steering group, Colin Warwick has filled a vital role in publicising the event and in overseeing all our printing and advertising requirements, matters in



which Alan McKinney has also involved himself usefully. Owen Dudley Edwards, who in his polymathic way knows about *all* the subjects we have been discussing today, though he confined himself actually to speaking on the arts, rendered most valuable service as a whipper-in of lecturers from a hunting field which seemed to be populated entirely by his own academic contacts. How successful this has been we have witnessed today. Andrew Fraser, our editor, has seen to it that the latest volume of our Book, number seven of the New Series, has appeared in time for you to have received it in the course of the conference. The Treasurer, Douglas Glass, has kept his finger on the purse-strings, and has ensured that all our big ideas could be afforded and paid for: at least I hope so!

This is not an Oscars ceremony, and I must stop before I burst into tears in a welter of general gratitude, and thank the induction loop, the carpet and the conference centre seats for all they have done for us. So I have but one further serious word of thanks. No one has played a greater part than our Secretary, Alan Borthwick, to whom we owe an immense debt of gratitude for his hard work and his cheerful efficiency over the past three or more years that this conference has been on the OEC's drawing-board. Alan has voluntarily remained in office as Secretary to see the Centenary year through, and this conference planned and brought to fruition. Much of what we have achieved today is due largely to him.

One name has not been mentioned today: that of our Honorary President, the Earl of Wemyss and March. Though he is not able to be with us, Lady Wemyss is very much so, and we ask her to convey our affectionate and warmest greetings to her husband. David Wemyss has held office in this Club for many years, and has welcomed us on several outings to Gosford. I am sure that he would not mind my saying that he is almost as old as our organisation. When his own centenary comes round maybe we should visit him as a body if he will not come to us. But there is one even more senior in years than Lord Wemyss and that is our former President, Dr J. B. Barclay. He has put in an appearance today at the age of nearly 99. When they say the *Old Edinburgh Club*, goodness do they mean it!

The final event of our centenary year will be the Civic Reception on 2 December by kind invitation of the Lord Provost and Council. To this we much look forward. One thing, however, troubles me about that event and I leave the thought with Councillor Dawe. In checking the proof of the invitation card soon to be issued by the City I was struck by the somewhat confusing running head. This formal occasion offered by its Patrons to the leading local history society seemed to have become a little distorted in the mind of the printer. The proof-sheet was titled thus: 'Old Edinburgh Club Invite: Baton Twirling Championship'. Clearly we must perfect skills that we never suspected might be called upon, if we are to meet such demands in terms of social inclusion and popular culture. I must apologise for the absence of our cheer-leaders in their ra-ra skirts to welcome the Council Leader to the lectern this morning.

Lord Rosebery told this Club at its first Annual Meeting that Edinburgh's face was its fortune. By this he meant that the beauty of the city was its greatest asset, but one that could easily be marred by the philistinism of destruction and development. Paraphrasing him, I would say now that the faces of the members of this Club are its fortune. Let there be more of them! Let those of you who have come today not as members but simply as interested citizens become members forthwith! We have an excellent lecture series stretching before us to the end of this Centenary year and on into the spring of 2009. Our programme of summer visits is in active preparation. All we need is a summer worth the name in which to hold it.

Together, OEC members, potential members who may join the Club today, and interested, even curious, supporters of this Centenary conference, together all of us, united, let us go on into our next century strong and keen and determined to survive to be 200 at the very least! Robert Louis Stevenson, that great man for Edinburgh, the place of his birth and ever fondly remembered despite the vilest climate under Heaven and its stifling social conventions, from his South Sea exile and indeed from beyond the grave on Mount Vaea gave a splendid rallying cry which I have adopted more than once in print for the Club this Centenary year. Unashamedly and justly repetitious, I quote it again now by way of conclusion to this our conference and as we stand at the threshold of our second century of concern and

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care for the historical record of our great and beloved city:

Oh still, ayont the muckle sea  
Still are ye dear, and dear to me  
Auld Reekie, still and on!

*The Countess of Wemyss thanked the President for his contribution to the day and to the Centenary year as a whole, and acknowledged on behalf of the Club his donation of the silver medallion to serve as a Presidential badge of office (see front cover of this volume).*