

N.B. This is a provisional, unpublished account. Please treat as such.

The Antiquarian

Robert, like everyone else, was under the spell of Walter Scott, and the work he did between his twentieth and thirtieth years used the same vein as his hero had been mining; ballads and folklore, the rich (and often mythical) history of Scotland; the homespun memoirs of the men and women who had known Burns and Bonnie Prince Charlie. He even used the same source, the man Scott called the Horace Walpole of Prince's Street, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe.

A more mature Robert wrote in 1833 that all this was "merely a youthful amusement...the ardent and unworldly feelings of one and twenty." By then his interests were turning to more pressing contemporary matters, education particularly. In a preface to his second book on old Edinburgh, "Reekiana", he said it would be the last of the genre; no more "antiquities", he had grown out of them. Scott was dead, this was the age of steam, of the Reform Bill, of Mechanics Institutes and mass emigration. Casting nostalgic backward glances at a Highlands that had never really existed and was now impoverished and fast emptying was self indulgent. Yet for all his growing preference for science and social affairs, he never lost his taste for the past, and continued to delve into it almost until his dying day.

In 1820, at the age of eighteen, he had separated from William and was in his own premises, and by 1822 was making a profit of £6 to £8 a month on his second hand books, selling stationery, and running a small circulating library. During those two years there were several false starts in an effort to branch out. There was half a novel on Charles 11 in Scotland; there were those three months in helping to run "**The Patriot**" whose views he did not share or even understand; and there was the abortive effort for William and he to start their own venture, "**The Kaleidoscope**."

This was launched on October 6th 1821 with a sub title "or Literary Amusement" and underneath "A Periodical Miscellany" and in small letters "Chiefly humorous." It was printed by William and written by Robert, and though he later thought it a juvenile effort best forgotten, it did in fact show the literary skills and the gentle observant eye of the accomplished essayist he later became. It was the work of a very young man - he was nineteen - and someone straining to be humorous most of the time, and not always succeeding.

Its aim he said was "to sweeten the bitter senna of precept with the genial lump of sugar of delight"; not a very happy metaphor and typical of its style. Yet there was a great deal of perceptive analysis, and some brave scorn in its pages. In an article addressed to Christopher North of Blackwoods "The Scorpion Cross Questioned" he wrote of the magazine's "unfounded calumnies...against the most respectable persons...the most shameless publication that ever saw the light of day." It was a School for Scoundrelism, and of its other editor Lockhart he asked nastily "Are you the only author worthy of succeeding your father in law? Are you not to all intents and purposes a ?" Ironically he was at

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the same time writing rather grovelling letters to Blackwoods; as one of 1827; "I enclose another tale founded upon Scottish tradition begging that if consistent with your inclination and convenience, you will give it the grace of your perusal. It is I believe of inferior interest to the story of Mrs Macfarlane and not nearly as accordant with the real facts of the case...being a second attempt it is certainly written with greater skill than the first." He praised the magazine for its "high character" and "to the care with which its conductor has excluded any article of an ordinary complexion."

" **The Kaleidoscope** " described serially an imaginary village called Gowkston "in the same manner as the Author of Waverley has excited interest...that the very mention of any skittling village about the Highlands has proved the making of all the contiguous inns..." he hoped to do the same for his villagers. Though intended to be a skit, the picture he painted was surely based on Peebles. It was he said divided into Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy. The Monarchy was a composite one consisting of ministers, the Provost, the drummer, the council, the exciseman, the Sheriff Substitute writers, the surgeons and the elders. The Aristocracy was "utterly devoid of interest"; and the Democracy "an undistinguished rabble."

The ministers "snuffle and thunder away their existence" but one of them preached ten sermons without mentioning regeneration or the devil: "Oh horror| The ink in my devout pen freezes." Heavy handed humour, but it shows Robert's feelings about the church even at this early age. The disgrace of a failed merchant in the village was shared by his children "his very children were nicknamed broken merchants at school...and the Provost's boys said they were a disgrace to be seen with." Was Robert here reliving his own experience over his failed father? This same merchant was "at this moment suffering all the miseries of a slow process of starving in Edinburgh" a not inaccurate picture of James Chambers' predicament three years before his death.

Gowkston inhabitants were in daily communication with a very real devil, and his visits were considered an honour. Old women were thought to be the cause of all illnesses and of one of these "not a single man, woman or child in the whole town goes past her door, without the precaution of thrusting their thumbs into the palms of their hands and looking always straight forward before their noses." The belief in witchcraft was still alive it seems, and Robert the folklorist noting its symptoms. Every New Year Gowkston feared the end of the world, and in 1811 when a comet appeared they barred their houses in terror that this was the real thing.

One article called "Thermometer of Misfortune" could also have been based on his father's decline, and showed him abandoning efforts to be facetious; writing with unironic sympathy on a subject he was to bring up again and again. The hero slowly sinks; drinks whisky instead of rum or brandy, starts to borrow from his friends, eats at cheaper and cheaper places, and finally buys penny rolls and milk from carts, drinking it in the street. His clothes become so dirty and shabby that the washerwoman refuses them. Finally he is "an ambiguous being who crawls about the highways of the world" if he hasn't managed to land a job as a scavenger, waiter, schoolmaster or tavern keeper; the bottom of the pile.

It was in this oblique social commentary that Robert was to become so skilled, and another piece called "The Horse Shoe" exhibits how early he had developed the noticing eye for small details that, like Dutch art, brought a room or a street to life. The story is of a Highlander carrying a horseshoe to town

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to sell, who finds lodging in the West Port for twopence a night and use of the landlady's fire. After tea,(the last of half an ounce bought at Lauder), he joins his fellow lodgers who are gathered round this fire sitting on truckle beds, the dregs of the city's streets.

There is a little woman in half mourning, wearing a black bonnet, the deserted wife of a church minister, who writes songs on The Woes of Queen Caroline which she sells at 1d a sheet; deserted wives were common and necessarily destitute. There is a potato merchant whose cart has broken down, and an Irishman who sells second hand books from a basket, and a woman with a squalling infant who had spent two years "bawling a song the chorus of which accuses "Royal Charlie" of being "lang in coming." One old woman sits muttering curses on the Deity for not "blasting the present sinful generation." A legless sailor sits in a cart pulled by two dogs, swearing and spitting; and reading a Psalm book with "battered nose, pale cheeks, hollow eyes" is an old prostitute who now carries water from a well for a living. Only a gipsy woman, with a basket of pincushions, scissors and ribbons, shows some spirit by flirting with the Highlander with the horse shoe.

The brothers were groping towards the idea of writing and publishing their own paper, and the demise of this first effort after a few months they treated philosophically. Two years before they had been persuaded to help publish that fiery sheet " **The Patriot**". One of the "humble and ingenious" friends they made was the grocer's apprentice Donovan, illegitimate and neglected, "little above the condition of mendicancy." one of many such, absently conceived and then abandoned with no laws to protect them. From his father he had inherited literary talents, and a passion for books, especially poetry. His own verses leant heavily on Byron but Robert saw them as "remarkably good" and helped him shape them.

Not surprisingly, given his background of casual neglect with no schooling and early drudgery, Donovan was a "violent radical" and he persuaded Robert and William to join him in bringing out a weekly paper, which made its first appearance in October 1819. William printed it, Donovan wrote the "bitter diatribes against the existing government" and Robert contributed some poems. It folded after eight weeks. and Donovan made his way to London to get work, but lost his testimonials and was soon penniless. When they met him again in Leith he was in a state of collapse, having walked from Berwick on threepence halfpenny, and though he struggled on for a few years more running a coffee stall among other things and helped with much kindness from Scott said Robert, he died "in great wretchedness" six years later. A shabby little life, and unexceptional, one of the victims of a callous society that allowed its talented young to die of neglect, unprotected if they were without "means" or "influence."

Robert did not share Donovan's views and described the whole affair as "a kind of dream." He appears unpolitical at this time, too absorbed in his shop, in coping with his deteriorating father, and in accumulating a little capital, to be interested in wider issues. Under Scott's influence his desire to see the "old order" kept in place, romanticised even, was strong. Edinburgh was a bourgeois city, still "a nest of lawyers", never to be industrialised, always middle class and comparatively prosperous. What was happening to the Old Town, around where his parents lived, was a sad necessity. Robert's social conscience seems, according to his autobiography, to have been unstirred.

What he now needed was a patron, and where better to start than at the top? With a startling assurance for one so young and poor (but perhaps desperate) he began to approach his hero Scott with

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gifts; poems of Scott's copied out in his best calligraphic hand, followed by the Lady of the Lake, and in the autumn of 1822 "**Illustrations of the Author of Waverley**" in which he offered real life models for Scott's characters. What is more, thanks to the help of Scott's publisher Constable, he got the opportunity of handing over the first of these pretty bits of handwriting personally.

Constable, the most important publisher of the time, though becoming embroiled in the muddles that four years later were to rock the publishing world and ruin him, was a catch in himself. How Robert persuaded him to get his unimportant work bound and provide him with an introduction he does not say.

But on a February day in 1822 "furnished with that document I proceeded next day to the poet's residence in Castle Street," with some trepidation surely, but with enormous excitement too.

It is difficult to comprehend the scale of Scott's prestige at this time; he was the Greatest Living Author not only in the British Isles but probably world wide, feted by "the leading soldiers and statesmen" of the continent according to his biographer Lockhart. "His works were the daily food, not only of his countrymen, but of all educated Europe" maintained Lockhart without exaggeration. He was a giant figure on the literary scene whose appearance at London dinner tables exalted hostesses, the literary lion they strove to capture in order, instantly, to make their reputations. Tourists came from afar to visit the scenes he had described.

Fortunately Scott's reputation as a courteous encourager of the young was borne out on this occasion. He spent half the year in Edinburgh as Clerk to the Court of Sessions, a sinecure he obtained with the help of Pitt, Dundas, the Duke of Buccleugh and Lord Melville. The Duke had also organised a sherrifship for him, the combined salaries of these appointments £1600. He got astonishing advances for his works, and made staggering amounts out of them, but even he had to pull the necessary strings when occasion demanded.

Lockhart described the study into which Robert was shown; a small square room, the walls lined with books all neatly arranged, history and biography on one side, poetry and drama the other, law books and distionaries behind his own chair. The sources he was working on were by him, neatly tied with red tape, and there was a chair for his "amanuensis", who wrote to his dictation. A dog and cat were always present, to whom he frequently spoke. In the garden outside, on a moonlight night some years before, the whole family had stood round the grave in which a favourite dog had been laid, Scott weeping.

Now "he received me as he received everyone who approached him with a homely kindness of manner which at once placed me at my ease; and having had the volume in his possession several hours he was able to express his surprise and that of his wife...at the extreme neatness and minuteness of writing." Presumably Robert did not sit around the house for hours, but returned later in the day for a report on his offering. Scott, an enormously busy man, had read it through and said he would put it in his library and it would be considered "not least curious of many of the curiosities there deposited." Perhaps "curiosity" was not quite the word Robert would have chosen to describe his penmanship, but any approval from his hero was welcome.

Scott went on to chat about the bookshop, and asked Robert to look out for anything rare or

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valuable that came his way. "I took my leave astonished at the easy manner of the man I had been accustomed to think of as a superior order of beings;" a god had deigned to exchange small talk with a young, unknown human being. Robert must have floated back to his shop through the February gloom. Of the many feelings, he remembered specially that "I would ever have it to say, perhaps many years after he would be gone, that I had seen and talked to him." And did those feet in ancient time rest just across the carpet from his own? Both men were partially crippled, Scott's pronounced limp the result of childhood polio, but this did not come up for discussion, though their disabilities had been a formative part of their lives. When he was rich and influential Robert was known for his easy accessibility, his kind encouragement of the novice or the struggler. He had a shining example at a time when he was badly in need of such encouragement himself.

. However Robert was restless. "I began to find myself in a less prosperous state than formerly;" his new premises, though on the edge of the New Town, were still not central enough to bring in enough custom. So it came as a wonderful spin off from his visit, when Scott commissioned him to write out the Royal Society's address to be presented to George IV on his visit to Edinburgh in August 1822. For this he was to be paid 5gns, and got commissions from three other societies to do the same for them. On top of this there were "poetical effusions" which, through a friend, Scott ordered from Robert. It was exactly what he needed to rent more expensive but more central premises.

This state visit of royalty, the first kingly presence on Scottish soil since the departure of James 6th (if you didn't count the Stuart incursion of seventy seven years ago) was suggested and stage managed by Scott, as president of the Royal Society, as Scotland's most eminent citizen, and as a personal friend of the king. Scott had first met the Prince Regent in 1815 at a dinner in London, and on all subsequent visits they shared convivial evenings. They were both accomplished raconteurs and amused one another with droll stories about legal figures. The Regent made Scott a baronet, and later used his influence to get Scott's son a post in the diplomatic service. At every level there was someone, a little higher in the scale, whose patronage would be useful. The whole social, diplomatic and political world, not to mention lucrative openings in trade, was sustained by barely-disguised backscratching.

So it was Scott who proposed and organised the state occasion, on the Regent's accession, but he had some persuading to do. Many found the king's conduct towards his queen Caroline distasteful if not downright cruel. The House of Hanover was not everywhere admired; kings and queens had created in Scottish history what Robert Louis Stevenson called a "stately farce", and since the departure of James, had largely ignored the country. But the "northern Tories" Scott's friends welcomed the celebrations and status the royal visitor would bring, and he himself, with his reputation and charm, convinced the doubters among magistrates and councillors. Edinburgh was a splendid backcloth to the festivities, as long as the starving poor were kept out of sight. As at the time of James's return from Denmark with his bride, the place would be spruced up; "all persons purge and clenze the streits, calsayis and gutteris..and all beggaris remove swa they bae nocht found beggand" ordered the town council, who on that earlier occasion also had to have a whip round their neighbours for linen for the royal table.

The king would not be taken near the slums and cellars where filth piled up, cholera and typhus epidemics regularly raged, and windows were kept sealed against the stench. Forty years later the first

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medical health officer wrote "a large part of Edinburgh still remains exactly what it was before Columbus discovered America or James IV perished at Flodden." In this part the streets were too narrow for processions, the "plaided panorama" Scott thought appropriate. The marching clansmen he imported in large numbers needed a lot of room to swing their kilts and wield their bagpipes, for the first time in their lives a picturesque peepshow.

Lockhart saw the sad irony in Scott's arrangements; "it almost seemed as if there were a cruel mockery in giving so much prominence to Highlanders who had always been considered a small remote and unimportant section of the community," and who were starting to be systematically deprived of the little they possessed. The Highlands were synonymous with poverty and backwardness, "a district doomed we fear to poverty and suffering which we find in their rain map of Europe with a double shade of blackness" as Hugh Miller wrote. After the Irish its people were the biggest headache of the period, and soon to be shipped off in their thousands to the new world.

But Scott with an eye to their physical charm, and with a somewhat fuzzy and distorted knowledge of their history, which he had long been glamorising, brought them down to process in front of their German king; to some of them a usurper at that. In fact it was their clan chiefs who ordered their attendance, with little thought to the fact that in August they might be needed at home for summer tasks of harvest or peats. Whether they were paid is not mentioned, but they were housed in tents round the castle and its precincts, and there were altercations, almost amounting to bloodshed, about precedence in the processions. Through a maternal great grandmother Scott entitled himself to wear a kilt, and for no reason at all the portly aging George IV was similarly attired, though this "portentous apparition" was not captured for posterity in the statue erected to commemorate the visit.

The celebrations began on August 14th when the royal fleet cast anchor at Leith. The clergy had been told to pray for a fine day, but "the weather was so unpropitious" that it was found necessary to defer the landing till next day; it poured. Scott braved the rain to row out to the Royal George, and the king welcomed him with a whisky. The glass honoured by the royal lips Scott took away as a souvenir, tucking it into a back pocket, and when he got home inadvertently sitting on it and letting out such a scream of pain that his wife ran in thinking he had sat on the scissors; a ridiculous little incident described in detail by Lockhart which, with the rain, got the visit off to a bad start.

Next day the weather cleared and there was no end to the "glittering and tumultuous assemblages," the daily feasting, the repeated bangs from the castle guns, the flags and banners and cavalcades of horses and carriages and colourful clansmen. It all cost a fortune but the only people who could question the extravagance were voiceless. They were used to seeing the rich glut themselves while they and their children starved.

At one of the many banquets the king toasted "The chieftans and Clans of Scotland and prosperity to the Land of Cakes," as if "the crowning glory of Scotland consisted in the Highland Clans and their chiefs" tut-tutted Lockhart. It took the cool appraising eye of a legal historian, Henry Maine, to show what the real condition was of these inhabitants of the bleak north, and the causes of their present misery. It was a situation, he said, where for the chiefs "the duties fell away, the rights remained, herein lay tragedy." It was also impossible for any society to advance "unless property is held by groups at

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least as small as families." When the fortnight of the king's visit was over, the picturesque clansmen were returned to land in which they had no statutory rights and from which they could be, and were, summarily evicted.

Robert made no comments in his autobiography about the visit, or Scott's handling of it. Later the Highlands and their plight became one of his concerns, but now he found himself in a worrying and embarrassing position. In December of 1822 he moved to better premises on the strength of the money promised for copying the "poetical effusions" at Scott's order, a more central shop in Hanover Street, but at first there was little improvement in business. "Consternation therefore began to come upon me when months elapsed after months and no intelligence arrived from Sir Walter Scott. after many misgivings I found myself impelled to put him in mind of the labour he had imposed upon me, and requested that he would render me any payment he thought appropriate."

He was mortified to receive from Scott £10 as a loan, to be repaid without interest, and a little homily about standing on his own feet. He wrote back explaining the case, and an apology immediately came back, with instructions to keep the £10 as payment for the work. It all upset Robert greatly, partly because he felt he had handled the situation clumsily, also because it caused a rupture in their tenuous but promising relationship. They saw no more of one another until the second edition of his **Traditions of Edinburgh** appeared two years later. When they did meet Scott seemed to have forgotten the whole embarrassing affair. By then he had more pressing things on his mind.

Robert was twenty one when he embarked on his first real book, writing it in his little shop, 16 feet in length, interrupted by customers, though not as frequently as he would have liked. The money he had earned from calligraphy though useful, was demeaning; any hack could learn the skill, and now it had served its purpose he never indulged in it again. Twice a day he had tea and bread and cheese, and at night walked back to his parents' "hotel" in the Canongate where his mother gave him a meal. He knew he wanted to write, but what about? Tied to the shop, he had little opportunity for research, but all round him lay history and folklore; in the houses he passed twice a day, in the streets, the shops, the people.

Here for the first time Robert exhibited the talent of the great original; the ability to see the extraordinary in the humdrum and obvious. He kept a notebook in which he noted down shop signs, doorknockers, the shape of old staircases, the number and position of taverns, the names of streets and closes. Nothing was too small or insignificant to be noticed and recorded, some of it in his phenomenal memory. He chatted to old men about their memories, and thought the smallest detail important. In the introduction to the 1868 edition of the book he described how the materials came to him "chiefly from professional and mercantile gentlemen." Urban history was born in his book, and folklore preserved at a time when both the physical shape and the social composition of the town were rapidly changing.

He accomplished this without the help of scholars, only relying on the gossip though valuable assistance of Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe. His introduction describes this eccentric aristocrat. "His thin effeminate figure, his voice pitched "in alt" -his attire as he took his daily walks on Prince's Street, a long blue frock coat, black trousers rather wide below and sweeping over white stockings, neat shoes - something like a web of white cambric round his neck and a brown wig coming down to his eyebrows - had long established him as what is called a character." Sharpe had written a book containing many

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stories of "diablerie" and another lampooning ultra conservative Calvinism. He had a biting wit, but was essentially good natured and jovial. He was however "aristocratic and cared nothing for the interests of the great multitude", plainly a snob.

Robert described his room; the back drawing room carpeted with green cloth and full of old family portraits, some on the walls but many more on the floor. A small room behind was where he "gave audience", absolutely crammed with family memorabilia. When Robert was entertained there, he had already produced two numbers of the Traditions, which Sharpe had read with pleasure, and he told Robert he and Scott had been planning to write such a book themselves, calling it "Reekiana", but they would now abandon the plan, and the material Sharpe had been going to use he would now hand over.

This was all welcome news. For all his quaintness and sarcastic tongue, Sharpe was a genuine antiquarian who had provided Scott with much of his material. He was also passionately fond of Edinburgh, and fought to save its past from being destroyed.

Oral history had been used in the countryside, where the peasantry were presumed to be the repository of all that was worth preserving of the past and Scott had relied heavily on it for his books, and his collection of ballads. The "traditions" that Robert used were a mixture of talk, manuscripts, a book or two, skilfully worked together into social history, but behind it all was a precocious assurance that however unlikely, this "trivial" material was the stuff of history, in urgent need of preservation. He also sensed that it would divert and amuse, if sufficient titillating gossip was worked into the more serious text.

One of his informants was a lady nudging one hundred, who had known Johnson and Boswell, and played with the great Alan Ramsay the poet in his house on Castle Hill. "He was charming she said, he entered so heartily into the plays of children, in particular gained their hearts by making houses for their dolls." Robert wished he could spend longer with this wonderful source, but she tired easily. Another useful source was a certain David Bridges, whose draper's shop in the Lawnmarket was a centre for artists and literary men. "He brought me information, he brought me friends, read and criticized my proofs and would I daresay have written the book itself if I had so desired." There must have been something appealing, as well as genuinely scholarly, about this very young man. The great Scott himself sent a packet of manuscripts to him to help with the work.

Through 1824, when the first "brochure" of the book appeared, small boys carried from Sharpe's house in Prince's Street to Robert's shop in the New Town, large amounts of manuscripts and old books about the aristocracy of the previous century, where and how they lived, the scandals that attended them, their manners and eccentricities. Sharpe himself was related to the noble family of Gordon, a bachelor who was supported by a brother from family funds, unwell by this time, but obviously pleased to be consulted, in the way of men who know a great deal but have never had the energy and application to make use of their materials; there are hints that he was homosexual so a handsome young man perhaps pleased him especially. He seems to have expected that their "purses" would benefit as well, though in fact most of the profits of the book went towards paying off James Chambers's lawsuit. But it must have been pleasant to be addressed "My dear and much admired Sir" and being told that he was "the greatest man and the greatest antiquary I know" even by such a young unknown as Robert.

Sharpe produced the aristocratic gossip; he himself had known many of the scions of the big families. Nevertheless he was frequently advising Robert to be cautious. Even without libel laws, it would not do to offend the titled ones, or air the many skeletons in their cupboards inadvisedly. For instance the story of Kathy Maxwell, which he imparted with relish, must on account get into print. One of the ducal Eglintoune family she was debauched by a villain, Sir John Hunter, and though she did marry, she "died in a close in the open street of Leith, with nothing of dress but a petticoat and a sailor's old jacket." She had by then written her memoirs "The Amours and Adventures of Miss Kathy M" but this interesting document Sharpe could not produce.

Some skeletons could be allowed an airing; another member of the Eglintoune family, a ninety one year old dowager, dined with her pet rats and washed her face in sow's milk, and a certain Duchess Catherine invited ladies to take walks and then made them sit round her on a dunghill; one feels she would soon run out of rambling companions. A grisly tale was of the idiot son of the second Duke of York who was kept imprisoned in a cellar, but one day escaped, and finding a kitchen boy turning a spit, killed him and roasted him; a judgement said some for the Duke's supporting the union of Scotland and England. "My father, who knew these young gentlewomen well, told me that the first time he ever saw the Duchess of Gordon she was riding astride upon a sow in the High Street, and Lady Wallace thumping it on with a stick." revealed Sharpe; Robert could use the story but omit mention of his father.

Other triviality was more revealing of old customs. "ladies who were not mad used to dress dolls. From Mrs Thomson's Jewel book it appears that Queen Marie had dresses for dolls and a bed for them; I suppose they were French fashions. And not many years ago ladies made likenesses of their friends in the shape of dolls, and put them in glass cases, with a landscape painted behind"; rather like stuffed partridges in hunting lodges.

Among Sharpe's friends "an old lady of seventy tells me that in her youth black velvet masks covering the whole face, were worn when women travelled in open carriages, or walked abroad in very cold weather. They were kept on by a bead, fixed by a string across the mouth of the mask - said bead being held in the wearer's mouth. She said that this did not interrupt tittle tattle in the least." Robert said that he was particularly interested in "last century old maids and dowagers of quality", a speciality of Sharpe's too. They were often formidable characters; "as Sir Walter Scott said to me one day, ... these old Scotch ladies had a very bitter rind, which repelled strangers, whereas their kernals were tolerable enough" Robert wrote. He was reminded of one of his grandmothers "who was always giving me presents when I was a boy, but who was so sour and illnatured in speech and to appearance...that all I got was accompanied with a scolding or a box in the ear."

From other less eminent informants Robert was able to describe the main street of the old town, leading from the castle down to Holyrood palace. On weekdays all was "jostle and huddlemont" and very noisy: "corduroyed men from Gilmerton bawling coals or tellow and...fishermen crying their caller haddies...whimsicals and idiots going along each with his or her crowd of listeners and tormentors; sootymen with their bags; town guardsmen with their Lochaber axes; water carriers with their dripping barrels; barbers with their hair dressing materials." On Sundays patrols went round during the time of church services to "take into captivity all persons found walking abroad." Presumably they would end

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up in front of the Kirk Session.

As he explained in more detail in "Reekiana," houses had at first been one storied, but pressure of population within the city walls had forced them upwards, sometimes to five stories. Each floor was taken by a separate family, in those days respectable men, lawyers and the like, sometimes even great philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith. On a typical floor there were "just three rooms and a kitchen: one room "my ladys" - that is the kind of parlour...another a consulting room for the gentlemen: the third a bedroom. The children with their maid had beds laid down for them at night in their father's room; the housemaid slept under the kitchen dresser; and the one man servant was turned at night out of the house." It was before the days of water closets, but a sign of status was to employ your own scavenger, who would remove what must have been a considerable weight of human waste, to be collected by night carts.

Even successful shopkeepers lived straitly; "Mr Kerr, the eminent goldsmith, in the Parliament Square, stowing his menage into a couple of small rooms above his booth-like shop, plastered against the wall of St Giles church; the nursery and kitchen however being placed in a cellar under the level of the street, where the children are said to have rotted off like sheep." In the insanitary conditions before plumbing and main drainage, children everywhere expected short lives.

Shopkeepers sat on the stairs outside their booths waiting for customers, and in the turbulent times when mobs took the rather fragile law into their own hands "it was required that each should be provided with "lang wappinis sick as a spear or a Jeddart staff" with which to sally forth and assist the magistrates, for example when a "tulzie" took place between the retainers of different noblemen.

Floors of the tall buildings or "lands" were often occupied by the "old ladies of quality" who fascinated Robert. They "resided in third floor flats of Old Town houses, wore pattens when they went abroad, had miniatures of the Pretender next their hearts and gave tea and card parties regularly every fortnight." At their tea parties little signs of good breeding were recognised; "the spoon in the saucer indicated a wish for more - in the cup the reverse." There was some tinkling on the spinet, a song or two, and whist. "At eight o'clock to a minute would arrive the sedan, or the lass with the lantern and pattens, and the whole company would be at home before the eight o'clock drum of the Town Guard had ceased to beat."

Some of them may have gone to one of the boarding schools "where young Ladies and Gentlewomen may have all sorts of breeding that is to be had in any part of Britain, and great care taken of their conversation." The speciality of Mrs Ogilvie's establishment was to teach her pupils to sit upright without touching the back of the chair, but other schools were more ambitious, offering "Wax works of all kinds, Phillogram work of any kind, Japan work on glass, sashes on transparent paper, Puff with tortoiseshell, Embroidering Lace, washing gauzes, Pastry, Boning fowls without cutting the back, Preserving, Writing and arithmetic, Music and dancing." Two old Miss Geds kept a school "with a portrait of the Chevalier in their parlour and looked chiefly to partisans of the Stuarts for support" of whom there were then plenty.

For entertainment, these ladies went to dances at the Assembly Rooms though as described by

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Goldsmith when he was a medical student in the mid eighteenth century, these were not very lively. At the end of the Assembly Hall "ladies sit dismally in a group by themselves" and when the musicians strike up "the lady directress, intendant or what you will pitches on a gentleman or lady to walk a minuet which they perform with a formality approaching to despondence and then pairs are chosen...so they dance much and say nothing." Robert heard that girls threw their fans into a cocked hat, and gentlemen picked them out to establish a partner for the whole session; not such a lottery as it sounds because very often they knew the owners of the fans.

The krames, the little shops plastered like swallow's nests to the buttresses of St Giles, as Robert Louis Stevenson described them, sold gloves, toys and lollipops, but also the work of gold and silver smiths, so it was there that couples went to "make the purchase of silver tea spoons which always preceded their nuptials." Like a lot of transactions buyer and seller betook themselves to the nearest tavern to celebrate, twice, the sale; once paid for by the smith, once by the customer. Legal business was usually conducted in taverns too, and one near the Tolbooth Church was where magistrates "took what was called the deid-chack - that is a refreshment or dinner of which those dignitaries always partook after having attended an execution." This constant recourse to the bottle produced a pattern of heavy drinking which only later came to be frowned on. All ranks indulged, and it was dangerous to walk the streets at night because of the noisy and aggressive gangs of drunken youths on the rampage; claret-louts perhaps. Taverns were the places to settle lawsuits as well as cement business deals, and a large one like the White Horse "was the frequent scene of the marriage of runaway English couples."

"There was something about the old Tolbooth which would have enabled a blindfold person led into it to say that it was a jail. It was not merely odorous from the ordinary causes of imperfect drainage, but it had poverty's own smell - the odour of human misery." This was Scott's Heart of Midlothian, described in more detail in "Reekiana". On the ground floor there was a hall where debtors were watched over by a city guard with a bayonet and a ramrod, often an elderly Highlander and not very threatening. On the floor above real "felons" were chained to a bar, the most dangerous in an iron cage. The third floor had a platform for the gallows, and right at the top were the poorest debtors, out of sight out of mind. The better off below had their own tavern "and new men were hailed with "Welcome, welcome brother debtor." They were allowed visits from wives and daughters, shawled and veiled. It was a well known fact that criminals of "rank" always escaped. Justice was a lottery and bribery a fact of life.

Ladies did brave the night streets on occasions, to visit under cover of darkness "wise men" or fortune tellers, who would also give them cures for sterility. They drew the tartan plaids of their servants across their faces for privacy, though in his later "**Domestic Annals**" Robert discovered that "The Town Council of Edinburgh forbade the wearing of plaids by women in the streets, under the pain of corporal punishment... The plaid was the Scottish mantilla and serving to hide the face was supposed to afford a protection to immodest conduct" As a result "matrons not being able to be discerned from loose-living women, to their own dishonour and scandal of the city" the practice was forbidden. Lady Primrose on a visit to the fortune teller was surprised to see in his crystal ball the marriage ceremony between her husband and another woman.

Men had a livelier time than their wives' and there were a great variety of clubs for them to join,

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though both sexes spent evenings at "oyster cellars", dingy rooms with huge dishes of oysters on a table, and plenty of porter to wash them down. The men then went on to their clubs; the Cape Club for fashionable young men, who called themselves boars, and the room in which they met a sty and described their talk as grunting. Robert had "perused the soiled and blotted records of this club" which had been kept by an old vintner, and which described orgies "not more fit for seeing the light than the Eleusian mysteries" but which sadly he doesn't reveal.

The Sweating Club had a playful routine of chasing people in the street, pinching and pulling them about until they were profusely sweating. The Dirty Club forbade its members to wear clean clothes, Black Wigs had to wear these, Oddfellows wrote their names upside down, Doctors of Faculty without the right to do so wore gowns and wigs appropriate to their unearned status. A bibulous, under occupied society is revealed, conspicuously wasteful and in a general sense useless, the signs of gentlemen. Occasionally one of them gambled away his all; one such had finally to take the post of hangman, the most despised and degraded of occupations. When he appeared for a round of golf the affronted members of the Bruntsfield Club drove him off the course, as today they might expel someone whose colour or haircut offended them.

Drunken aristocrats were not the only disturbers of the peace, the Edinburgh "mob" was notorious, at the time of the Union "Edinburgh was only kept in some degree of quiet during the greater part of that crisis by a great assemblage of troops... In the Porteous mob we have a singular example of popular vengeance rigged out in the most cool but determined manner." There were also, on a smaller scale, the "bickers", "on Saturday afternoons when the schools and hospitals held no restraints over their tenants." These were gang fights between the New Town and Old Town boys, the George Square and Potterow Boys, and other associations, who hurled stones with sometimes fatal results.

"Traditions" described other aspects of the old Edinburgh, the theatre for instance at the Canongate, at whose demise Fergusson wrote;

"No more from box to box the basket piled
With oranges as radiant as the spheres Shall with their luscious virtues charm the sense
Of taste or smell. No more the gaudy beau
With handkerchief in lavender well drenched
Or bergamot, or rosewater"

would drown the smell of the common citizens, who were regaling themselves with porter as they waited for the curtain to rise.

The North Loch, which was drained when the New Town was being built, had been at one time the centre for witch ducking, and a favourite place for suicides, as well as a boating lake and provider of picturesque swans, fed by the council. When it was still spongy it had a causeway built across it, which became the scene of fierce gang warfare, the poor children from the Old Town streaming down to join in the fray.

At the beginning of 1825, after the appearance of the third number of the "Traditions", Robert wrote

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to Sharpe. After chatting about other things and as if the idea had just occurred to him "By the by Sir Walter Scott comes to town now and as I believe he could be of great service to the Traditions, both in his way of corrections of the first two numbers and contributions to the rest, I wish most anxiously that he could be interested in the undertaking. An article or so from him would make my fortune. Or were it merely understood that he assisted me at all, it would be as good. I am persuaded he knows more of Edinburgh (as he does of every other thing) than any man alive. The marginal notes he will have made upon an interleaved copy which I happen to know he got, would be of great service in the new editions which I am about to put to press. I knew Sir Walter and he knows me, but it is so long now since I saw him, that I do not like to break the ice by calling; and moreover, I feel particularly delicate in making any request of such a nature, as I do not know what literary designs he may have towards the same objects. Now you know him as well, and he has been on one occasion so obliged to you, that you might perhaps use the freedom with him of proposing that he should assist me, or you might at least know whether the freedom ought to be used with him at all or not. I leave this to yourself, with certification that my gratitude for the favour of Sir Walter's countenance would know no bounds."

It is surprising that the touchy, rheumatically nearly-blind Sharpe did not take offence at this request; he might have suspected that he had only been approached because of his long friendship with Scott, might have felt his own sustained assistance downgraded. Later something did offend him. On delivery of the final sheets of the "Traditions" he sent a note back; "I read the stuff you delivered, having read it only once over - and that once made me sick - among 1000 faults it wants uniformity of spelling which I cannot well correct - I advise you to throw it in the fire." Robert must have been stung, but ignored him.

Robert ended this letter, perhaps by way of soothing any possibly wounded feelings, by asking that he sign his letters, for he was busy making an autograph collection, and for one of Sharpe's rare signatures he had got three others, Dr Thomson the chemist, Combe the phrenologist and Hector Macneill; "so you see from this the estimation in which you are held." In his next letter he expressed the intention of dedicating the first complete edition of the "Traditions" to Sharpe and the second to Scott, because of "my own feelings of respect and gratitude for you and Sir Walter."

"Traditions" could have been a better book. It could have given less attention to the idle rich and more to the army of servants who waited on them. It could have ventured some opinions about the nature of the society described, placing it under a more scholarly scrutiny, instead of bringing forward a gallery of characters like marionettes, to perform for amusement. An older Robert would have looked for statistics, trends, larger issues. He recognised its faults himself and corrected some of them in the second edition of 1868. It was a plum pudding of a book, made as he admitted from rather scant ingredients, but amongst the frothed up mixture there was rich fruit. "Naive and gossipping" he admitted it to be, rightly, but it was the first attempt to collect, cautiously analyse, and preserve the lore of city life.

After hearing the great Dr Chalmers had enjoyed the book, Robert wrote thanking him for "pointing out fit objects for my researches and encouraging my already-adopted intention of extending the work into another series" because he had had doubts about the "real use" of such a book. "I shall henceforth knock at the doors of the poor people in the Old Town for the purpose of questioning them about their habitations more frequently and impudently than ever." In fact his greatest contribution to Edinburgh's history were his essays on the middle classes of the expanding New Town.

"Traditions" started with modest success, two hundred and fifty copies first printed out, then a further six hundred. Then Constable, "Whose ideas had no fault but that of extravagance" ordered two thousand eight hundred copies, of which a thousand were sent to London. "The London house beheld the consignment with surprise, being of the opinion that the local nature of the book forbade the hope of selling a tenth part of that quantity in England and the whole parcel to my great mortification was returned to my hands." Fortunately he offloaded it onto another publisher, Tait, but "It is an expressive proof of the enormous ideas of Mr Constable in publishing, that even in eight years of the utmost activity and frequent advertising, they have not been able to clear off above two thousand of the quantity he advised to be printed." Constable's "enormous ideas", somewhat awry on this occasion, were soon to be useful to Robert however.

As well as being a comfort to his father in his last days, and bringing a very young man to the attention of the publishing world, the book brought to his door the idolised Sir Walter. "He came into my little shop one day with Mr Lockhart whom I had formerly seen, and sitting down on a form began to discourse familiarly about my publication...Having heard that Mr Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe was among the number of my informants...he concluded that a part of the work was written by that gentleman." Scott took up a copy, and read out "a somewhat droll account of the many marriages of the Earl of Eglintoune." Laughing heartily, he declared the passage was typical of Sharpe. Robert was too bashful to protest, but in a note he "had occasion" to write to Lockhart he explained that it was his work, only based on some notes provided by Sharpe. He could not bear for his hero to underestimate him.

The Tait brothers continued to have faith in Robert, in spite of the great weight of unsold "Traditions" on their hands, and asked him to write for them a "superior kind of guide book for Scotland" for which two volumes he was to get £100 for the first edition, and further fees for any subsequent ones.

But now, 1826, came the crash of Scott's publishers, and shock waves went through the whole profession. However the Tait's thought a guidebook might still sell, and Robert started a serious course of reading. This, he soon realised, was not enough, and buying a pair of "easy shoes" for the first time (not in fact easy for him with his deformed feet) he set out on a five month walk in March. He walked two thousand miles during an exceptionally hot summer, collecting "from the conversation of rustics and others innumerable local anecdotes and traditions." The resulting book, "The Picture of Scotland" was published in 1827.

Though stilted, the style still Scott-encumbered, The Picture has many delightful vignettes, and could be usefully carried round the country by a modern tourist, it is so full of history and tradition and sidelight. When visiting Burns's cottage he commented that it was "an auld clay biggin" of two rooms, and recalled how part of a wall had collapsed after the poet was born; rural poverty of a kind that shaped the great man's life; "his own hopeless poverty, the rudeness and prejudices of the people among whom he was placed, and the unhappiness of the time when he flourished" darkening his spirit. This was confirmed by a David Siller, a friend of Burns, who described him as looking older than his years, "gloomily studious" reserved and silent, except when in "enlightened company"; and presumably when sober.

Robert "did" Fife on foot in nine days, and was not enthusiastic about St Andrews, a town he later

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loved. Now he found it "but the ghost of a fine city" of "almost monastic quiet." It was full of wealthy residents with nothing to do, and particularly maiden ladies for whom it was a "vast nunnery." This gave it "a clean, firm, pale emaciated look"; its university apparently didn't alleviate this somewhat sterile gentility. Kirkaldy was still in the early days of industrialisation, and its chief interest was the house of Adam Smith, where he had composed his "immortal treatise." There was still to be seen a greasy mark above the mantle piece, where Smith had rubbed his pomaded head. He composed to an amanuensis standing and walking backwards and forwards and occasionally leaning his head against the mantelpiece. In the "Traditions" Robert had talked to someone who had known the great economist and remarked "How strange to think of one who has written so well on the principles of exchange and barter - he is obliged to get a friend to buy his horse corn for him."

In the previous year had appeared, a much more important collection, which his renewed friendship with Scott, and some contributions from Sharpe, enabled him to bring out in 1826. This was "**Popular Rhymes of Scotland**" which he said were to fill a "presumed desideratum" in what was a gathering interest in ballads and songs. These were neither; they were short verses, verses of song, some tales, superstitions; "short snatches of verse applicable to places, families, natural objects, amusements." Nobody had thought this ephemera worth studying before. Robert, with his unerring instinct, knew it was, and brought to bear on nurse's lullabies, children's singing games, weather jingles, slogans, healing charms, the weight of a real, if yet tentative, scholarly discipline.

For one thing he categorised them, as folklorists were to follow him in doing, into Types; the Popular Reproach or jeering slogan; Devil's Riddles, "compositions representing the Enemy of man in the endeavour to confound some poor mortal with puzzling questions;" Puerile Rhymes, which included children's singing games (with the accompanying game described) or the jingles they used in claiming a find, challenging a guess, having hiccoughs, yawning, making a bargain, starting a race. Nurse's songs became more meaningful when he described exactly how the fingers and toes of babies were played with in them, and he helpfully appended the tunes.

Some of the verses seemed meaningless, until he went to one of his many informants to supply a background. For instance there was the chant from East Lothian;

Oh weel's me noo, I've gotten a name
They ca' me short-hoggers of Whittinghame."

The story behind this, he learnt, was that of an unmarried mother who murdered her baby near a large tree on the outskirts of the village. The ghost of the infant was seen on dark nights running between the tree and the churchyard, moaning at its lack of a name. One night a drunk reeling home called out cheerfully to the spectre "How's a' wi' ye this morning, Short-Hoggers?" at which the happy ghost ran off, calling out the verse, and was never seen again. There is a great deal revealed in these few words; for instance the prevalence of infanticide, and the strong belief that an unchristened child could not rest, but must become a restless spirit. There were many of these wandering Scotland, and it would be interesting to find out who saw them, when and why. In this case it was old women and drunks at night near a graveyard.

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Robert included several Fireside Nursery Stories in the collection, three of them supplied by Sharpe, as he remembered them being told by his nurse Jenny in 1784. Thankfully neither he nor Robert tried to translate the tales into more elegant language, or remove from them local asides supplied by the story teller, and the results were delightfully vivid and full of topical interest. The story of Rashie-coat, (Cinderella in Scottish clothes), told of a king's daughter who ran away because she did not want the man offered her in marriage. She arrived at another "king's hoose" (no palaces in these stories, kings were simpler mortals, probably local lairds) and got a job "to wash the dishes, and tak oot the ase and al'that."

Being Scotland, it was to church she wanted to go, but could not because she had to stay at home and cook the dinner, but a fairy arrived and relieved her of this task, with the words:

Ae peat gar anither peat burn,
Ae spit gar anither spit turn
Ae pat gar anither pat play

Let Rashie-coat gang to the kirk the day."; the king's kitchen it seemed, being supplied with a peat stove with a spit on which were hung pots like any humble house.

So Rashie-coat went to church, where the king's son (from a nearby estate presumably) fell in love with her, though nobody else appeared to recognise her, and when she got home the dinner was cooked "and naebody kent she had been oot." This happened the next Sunday, but on the third "the king's son sat near the door, and when he saw Rashie-coat slippin'oot afore the kirk scaled, he slippit oot too, and trippit her." But she got away, dropping a slipper. All the ladies tried it on, and finally the hen-wife, (the local wise woman who supplied healing herbs, foretold the future and counselled the distraught), brought her daughter along. She "fush her dochter to try and get it on, and nippit her fit, and clippit her fit, and got it on that way." So the king's son had to marry her, but on the way to the ceremony "ridin' on a horse, an' her ahint him" a talking bird revealed the truth, he and Rashie-coat were wed,

"And they lived happy and happy
And never drank oot o' a dry cappy." which was the hope for every parting guest.

The story The Changeling began with the nurse's comments on the lack of fairies these days. "A'body kens there's fairies, but they're no sae common now as they war langsyne. I never saw ane mysel' but my mother saw them twice - once they had nearly drooned her, when she fell asleep by the water-side; she wakened wi' them ruggin' at her hair, and saw something howd down the water like a green bunch o' potato shaws." The church frowned on fairies, and they had departed sulking into their green mounds.

The heroine of the story, Tibbie, had a baby "and it thrave weel for it sookit weel." Babies that did not get the breast tended to die, since there was no substitute milk, and the poor could not afford wet nurses. One day Tibbie went to the well for water, leaving the baby alone; "she couldna' be lang awa', for she had but to gae by the midden, and the peat-stack, and through the kail-yard and there stood the well." But when she got back "she saw a sicht that made her heart scunner", the baby gone and in its

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place a "withered wolroon." It would not suck, but consumed large quantities of porridge and was "aye yammerin' and greetin'."

Tibbie had spun some yarn, and wanted to take the web to market, so she asked her neighbour, a hump-backed tailor, to baby sit for her. She promised him in payment "a blast o' the goodman's tobacco pipe forbye". To the tailor's surprise the infant in the cradle produced some bagpipes and began to play them, but convinced that this was in fact a changeling "he catches the bairn by the cuff o' the neck, and whupt him into the fire, bagpipes and a'" Rather unsatisfactorily, the story ended with no word of the return of the stolen infant.

Whuppity Stoorie, the local variant of Grimm's Rumpelstiltskin, began with the man of the house, "a vaguing sort o' a body" going off to a fair and not returning. "Some said he listed, and ither some that the wearifu' pressgang cleekit him up, though he was clothed wi' a wife and a wean forbye. Hechhow! that dulefu' pressgang, they gaed about the kintra like roaring lions, seeking whom they nicht devoor. I mind weel, my auldest brither Sandy was a' but smooored in the meal ark hiding frae thae limmers. After they war gane, we pu'd him oot frae amang the meal, pechin' and greetin...My mither had to pike the meal oot o' his mooth wi' the shank o' a horn spoon." Cannon fodder was always wanted for the European wars, and pressgangs roved the country, and many men enlisted when drunk in the evenings of markets and fairs.

Left with a baby and a sow, the goodwife was horrified to go into the sty one morning to find the pig on its back "ready to gie up the ghost." Her one source of income was about to disappear, so she "sat doon on the knockin' stone wi'her bairn on her knee and grat." The knocking stone was where the meal was ground, and probably the only dry place in the farmyard. Chancing to look down the brae, she saw an old woman approaching dressed in green with a tall beaver hat on her head. She poured out her sad tale, and the old lady offered to cure the sow, in return for an unspecified bargain on which they wet thumbs.

The pig was cured, but then came the horrible truth about the bargain; in return the fairy woman demanded the baby, giving three days to his mother to think of her name. A bargain was a bargain, and the distraught mother wandered off into the woods with her baby, where in an old quarry pit grown over with gorse, she heard "the birring o' a lint wheel and a voice liling a sang" the words of which were:

Little kens our guid dame at hame
That Whuppity Stoorie is my name!"

When she crept through the bushes she was able to see that it was the green fairy woman at the wheel, and so next day "at the appointit time she puts the bairn behind the knockin' stane, and sits down on't it hersel." When the green lady approached and asked for her reward "she bangs aff her knees, sets up her mutch croon, and wi' her twa hands faulded afore her, she maks a curchie down to the grund" and produced the name, Whuppity Stoorie. The fairy fled with a screech, and Robert commented in a footnote that the name could have originated "from the notion that fairies were always in the whirls of dust occasioned by the wind on roads and in streets." this dust called stoor.

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It was forty years before John Campbell took up the challenge first suggested in these stories, and set off on his epic journey through the Highlands and Islands collecting tales exactly as they were told by the inhabitants, not tampering with a single word or trying to improve and polish. After him others followed. Robert Chambers name is not remembered among the great folklorists but at twenty three he laid the foundations of their craft. He had an unerring inner judgement, natural to him. He had humility too, unlike lady "poetesses" who tinkered with ballads and passed off their own pretty effusions as genuine, or Burns's famous, or infamous, George Thompson who always knew best and irritatingly mangled much of what came his way. Robert later cast a critical eye over many "old" ballads such as Sir Patrick Spens. What bride was being collected from Norway for instance? And did they, in those faraway times, have feather beds and cork-heeled shoon? Sir Walter himself was hoodwinked he later discovered, though his Border Minstrelsy was collected in good faith and helped make the subject popular.

Sir Walter was interested in Robert's rhymes, and generous with help, and they quite often walked back from Parliament Square together talking of their common interest in "antiquities." Robert, never one to miss opportunities, remembered Scott's funny stories and in his third folklore collection of 1832 "**Scottish Jests and Anecdotes**", included a section on "Mots of Sir Walter Scott" collected on these walks. Scott's imagination often outran his scholarship. His old friend and admirer, Kirkpatrick Sharpe wrote of the Waverley novels: "they contain nothing, pictures of manners that never were or never will be, beside ten thousand blunders as to chronology, custom etc." There could have been something of jealousy, something of elderly rancour in this criticism of a man whose death "turned his life into a comparative blank" according to David Masson.

The Popular Rhymes did not need to be hammered out by William, and Robert at twenty five had two publishers, Constable and the Tait brothers, interested in his work. Still with his thoughts in Scott country, he began a history of the '45 rebellion, with the idea of selling it to Constable's Miscellany, a new publishing venture which the ever adventurous Archibald had launched with a view to producing large quantities of cheap but serious literature for a burgeoning literati. The origins of this idea are amusingly described by Lockhart, though for a variety of reasons Lockhart is not entirely to be trusted.

He knew that Scott had already suffered somewhat from the wild schemes of his publisher. In 1822 he wondered if Constable's brain had not been affected by taking too much foxglove for a chest complaint, because he was writing every week or two with projects; he wanted Scott to produce a book every three months and was generous with ideas - Hastings, Cressy, Bosworth Field could follow after Bannockburn. His enthusiasm was catching, and Scott was infected with "an almost mad exhilaration near akin to his publisher's own" though even he could not keep up with the dizzy schedule.

So in 1824 at a dinner party in Abbotsford, the launching of yet another "grand scheme" this time to revolutionise the whole idea of publishing, was at first treated with caution. The only other guest was Walter Ballantyne; the "florid bookseller" and the "portly printer" and Scott himself were teetering on the edge of a precipice by then, but the port was pushed round and in the mellow atmosphere Constable brought forth his latest brainchild.

He started by removing his d'oyley and putting in its place a paper that he pulled from his pocket. This turned out to be a copy of the schedule of assessed taxes for the year, on which he had scribbled

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many calculations. He had worked out how many people would have to pay taxes on luxuries such as hunters, racers and four wheeled carriages, and why would not these "hundreds of thousands" be prepared to add books to their list of necessities, since most of the things they now considered important were unknown to their fathers?

Scott thought it unlikely that any of the lairds he knew would spend £10 a year on literature, but Constable meant to change all that. "If I live for half a dozen years, I'll make it as impossible that there should not be a good library in every decent house in Britain as that the shepherd's ingle-nook should want the saut poke (salt box)" he boasted. Indeed the ingle-nook itself could support a shelf for novels. The plan was simple; a three shilling or half crown volume every month "which must, and shall sell, not by thousands or tens of thousands but by hundreds of thousands - ay by millions! Twelve volumes in the year, a halfpenny of profit upon every copy of which will make me richer than the possession of all the copyrights of all the quartos that ever were...twelve volumes so good that millions must wish to have them, and so cheap that every butcher's callant may have them if he pleases to let me tax him sixpence a week."

This was an idea that would be taken up by many booksellers, ending with the paperback market, and Scott was cautiously approving. If the books were good, and there was always a reserve supply ready, he thought it would work. He had been thinking of turning to history, so what about a book on Napoleon to start the ball rolling? As soon as his guests had departed he started work on his history, with a preliminary sketch of the French Revolution, and as he proceeded he found sources arriving in stacks from Constable, "a new library of printed materials, which continued from day to day pouring in upon him, till his little parlour in Castle Street looked more like an auctioneer's premises than an author's." This helpful material was delivered in wagons literally, collected by Constable from London, Paris and Amsterdam.

So the Miscellany opened with Napoleon, and to be asked to follow in the footsteps of such a prestigious author was a great complement to Robert. However when Constable offered him £30 a volume for his Rebellion he turned it down "from pique in finding that he was more liberal to individuals who had not yet written any successful book." There was stalemate until Constable died in 1827, and his successor bought the book for £100 and it was published in October of that year. It was history, to be expanded and revised later, and will be considered when he wears his historian's hat.

In the same year Robert moved to a larger shop, leaving his brother James to run the little room in which he had produced five books. Now he had an assistant and a back room to retire to, and it was here that he was visited by Anne Kirkwood, the girl he would marry. As he describes their courtship, it comes as a surprise that a young unmarried girl could wander unchaperoned into a man's dark study, though presumably there was the assistant in the front room. The time they spent there was the most private they ever achieved it seems. It was little enough on which to reach momentous decisions about the rest of their lives, but the decision to marry Anne, carried out nine months after their first meeting, was the best one Robert ever made.

Robert produced two volumes of Scottish Songs, and two of ballads, and viewed the subject both as a historian and scholar, and as a great lover of music and of Scotland. Common sense and research

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proved to him that most of the so called old songs were in fact quite recent, and that Scott and Hogg had been misled. In his book he prefaced each entry with a short background commentary describing how a line or two of original material had been worked over by one or more hands, often graciously, and in the case of Burns with genius, but the resulting songs were not genuine old works of real old rustics.

The introduction to the later edition of songs of 1862 sketched the process. The fifteenth century produced a flowering of great poets in Scotland - Henryson, Douglas and Dunbar and others - but they never thought of composing songs. They were followed by the religious struggles when the dour precepts of Calvin made songs "clandestine and sinful" and treated them "simply as one of the bad habits of the people." Later again, with the return of a more relaxed age, songs became fashionable but they were written by "persons of condition", the most notable being Allan Ramsay, who made a collection of them in 1724, **The Tea Table Miscellany.**"

In mid eighteenth century there was a vogue for composing on the old models, and several collections resulted, but "it remained for Robert Burns to arrive and purge away what dross remained in the national song." When Burns arrived in Edinburgh in 1787 a local man had started a collection entitled "**The Scots Musical Museum**", a project into which Burns threw himself with ardour. He contributed his own songs, gathered others till then unknown, and wrote "purified and improved versions of many homely ditties"; all very worthy but alas, much "unfit for decorous society, was permitted to mingle with the general mass." Robert was fairly broadminded, but still wanted to protect wives and daughters (who sang the airs at parties) from the worst crudities of the rural past; and very crude indeed many of them were.

Trolling through the book, it is clear that very few indeed of the famous songs, such as The Flowers of the Forest and The Border Widow's Lament, are genuine. As for the experts, "Alan Cunningham and James Hogg are but fallacious authorities to rest upon." and one of the songs had "all the marks of proceeding from Hogg's own pen." Burns was wrong in attributing one song to the Battle of Bannockburn, it was in fact Jacobite. Most of the songs were "the products not of rustic but of cultivated minds. They display humour both rough and hearty and of a sly kind. They all come before the world anonymously and for the most part can be traced to the early part of the eighteenth century."

A typical example of how a song was worked on, was Auld Lang Zine, which started its career as Old Long Sine in Charles 1's reign and appeared in a collection of 1711. Allan Ramsay improved it, and finally Burns took the idea and largely rewrote it. In his hands words were safe, but Robert's friend George Thompson who helped and encouraged Burns, was something of a menace. He made a collection to which Robert contributed, and consistently "retouched" and bowdlerised, and also introduced English words, telling Robert "I greatly dislike in songs written at the present day such Scottish words as are drawn from the low or vulgar part of society." It is somewhat surprising that Robert helped him, since he was firmly in favour of preserving this literature intact. The story was the same for ballads, whose suspect origins he also traced.

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So at twenty seven what can be said of Robert Chambers' character? What sort of man was he offering his Anne? Very few letters remain, in fact only the ones he wrote to her in the months before their marriage, a few to her later, and a scattering of other correspondence. The autobiography of four years later is so stilted in style and content that virtually nothing comes through of the brilliant author of two trail-breaking books, acquaintance of Scott and Sharpe, protege of Constable and Tait. He sounds something of a prig, boasting of his "ceaseless exertions and extraordinary self denial" and not completely honest when he says "I have never asked favour of a loan from anyone, never looked for patronage to any individual." And was he assessing his own character correctly when he admitted "I never in my life could be troubled for a moment, with things which obviously did not tend to profit or some other kind of good."

If he could not sum up his own character objectively, nor can I. Was he a Man of his Time: earnest, curious, confident, industrious? Certainly he was all those things, and complacent, cautious, class-conscious, custom-rooted; and inventive, imaginative, open-minded, progressive. In fact the list of adjectives to describe him could be applied to almost everyone else, then and now, and it seems a pointless exercise to find the mould to pour them into and call it Robert Chambers.

One or two characteristics do emerge as "typical" though, in a general way; typical that is of the nineteenth century, though here again any generalisation can be questioned. Yet G.M. Young's brilliant evocation of the age contains one that seems valid: "As early Victorian thought is regulated by the conception of progress, so the late Victorian mind is overshadowed by the doctrine of evolution." Robert and his contemporaries of the eighteen twenties and thirties hardly needed to "believe" in progress, it was apparent all around: as they moved into the light, airy houses of the New Town, and watched the railways being built, and learnt of the expansion of mills and coal mines, and heard of empire building, and did not hear (at last) the sound of canons firing in useless, debilitating wars. There was no doubt at all that Things - quality and length of life, material comfort, equality of opportunity - were getting better. It was a bonus to be assured by Combe that this was a divine Law.

Temporarily of course they were worse, for women and children in factories for instance, and the Irish, and evicted Highlanders, but even for them there was the possibility of progress, and the vast Victorian conscience was awakening. The century that used to be depicted as sand into which the the wonders of the Enlightenment had run, sterile and hidebound, has shown itself under closer inspection to have been revolutionary in all the fields that affected the people, rich and poor; education, sanitation, medicine, transport, poor relief. It was after all the century of Dickens, Mill, Carlyle, Chadwick, Pestalozzi, Nightingale, George Eliot, Darwin and Malthus; he wrote his great work just before it opened, but it was an enduring influence. And on the sidelines were Coleridge, Byron and Wordsworth and of course the Voice of the Age, Tennyson.

Robert, with his head in the past during his twenties, could not fail to be part of the progressive present too. He would read of strikes of starving handloom weavers and salters (people he had lived amongst) and would be conscious of the excitement attending the Reform Bill and the unease on the subject of slavery. He had only to pick up the **Edinburgh Advertiser** to be confronted with court cases involving the transportation or execution of petty thieves, men and women, and in an opposite column read of the frivolous waste in aristocratic junketings, where the cost of one lady's gown would have kept six families for a year. He read George Combe, particularly **The Constitution of Man**, and

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knew that there were social problems that must be addressed; working hours, education, the judiciary and the condition of the Irish, who said Combe "now exhibit to the world a spectacle of suffering and degradation unequalled in modern Europe." He knew his Burns, but even without the great satires he was well aware that the church and its ministers were not only too powerful but often preposterously un-Christian.

Robert's fear of ruin and disgrace, such as had befallen his father and blighted his childhood, always tempered his reforming zeal. With the liberal circle he joined in the next decade, he believed in slow and steady progress. He could never have been a Chartist or even an Abolitionist, though he agreed with their basic principles. Eventually these two (of the many) sides to his character, the cautious and the progressive, were brought into crisis collision when he felt moved to write a book that would rock the foundations of the contemporary world, and threaten his family with the ruin he always dreaded.

Just as his own character was full of contradictory traits, so the city he lived in exhibited many faces, and it was becoming less easy to compartmentalise its classes. Returning Nabobs and newly rich merchants were buying country estates and setting up as lairds though their blood was not in the faintest degree blue. William Chambers celebrated his success by the purchase of a vast mansion on the Tweed for himself, his wife and their dogs. Robert with a large family was happy to marry several of his daughters into "trade." Boundaries were becoming less fixed and the ability to move across them easier. The idea once held that Scotland was less class conscious than England does not stand up to scrutiny.

The Parish School was supposed to be the rock on which was reared an egalitarian society, since it was to educate the sons (very seldom the daughters) of the laird, the minister, the doctor, the large farmer, the labourers under him, the blacksmith, the meanest cottar in his clay lined hovel. John Knox in his Book of Discipline had laid out a plan of education that was intended to make the same schooling available to all, and technically it was. Steady light shed on these schools over the years, has shown the picture to be less cheerful than was generally believed however. Weavers' and fishermens' sons left school young and became weavers and fishermen; with a few exceptions it made little difference that they had had the "chance" to learn to read and repeat the Westminster Confession.

The countryside was, until recently, where most of the population lived and worked, but its own revolution and the boom in cotton cloth manufacture, was sucking villagers into towns; Glasgow and Paisley and Lanark more than Edinburgh. The life of one poor boy, his experience in a parish school and as a farm labourer and finally in the army, is revealed in an extraordinary work; the "Autobiography of a Working Man" of Alexander Somerville. While Robert was sitting in his shop collecting materials for his antiquities, Alexander, nine years younger, was experiencing what it was to be one of a large family on the land. His story lays to rest any remaining illusions of the "pastoral heaven" lovingly evoked by people who knew little about it.

Somerville's father was a carter, carrying coals and lime until his horse died. He could not afford another, so turned to work in the lime kilns, along with his elder brother who, (like many others), was killed in an accident when, as he was loading lime into the hold of a ship, he was suffocated. Labouring on a farm followed, and marriage, and many children, Alexander born in 1811 was the eleventh, though only six survived. His parents carried round with them a pane of glass as a window for the hovels they

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were provided. Fifteen shillings a week was the highest wage Somerville senior earned as a barrow man or mason's labourer, building the "splendid mansion" of his rich employer Sir James Hall.

The family were provided by Sir James with a hut or shed twelve feet by fourteen, with a clay floor, no partition, and one small window. For this they had to pay rent, which they did in the form of labour. His mother while pregnant was a stack carrier at harvest time, carting sheaves on a canvas stretched between poles, up a gangway to the upper floor of a barn. When her baby was born it was carried to her to be suckled; unlike peasant women elsewhere, babies were not taken to work in Scotland. Unsuckled they died.

Alexander did not go to school until he was eight because it was two miles away and because he had no suitable clothes; the years after the Battle of Waterloo were "dear years" with prices soaring. After 1818 things eased and his parents were able to make him presentable enough to enjoy the beatings and bullyings in the thatched hut that was the Parish School. The schoolmaster, who "was a teacher only because he was lame" was easily offended and then "took his great leathern belt thirty inches long, two and a half inches broad, which was split half way up into six thongs, the end of each having been burned in the fire to make it hard, the other end of the belt having a slit in it, into which he put his hand and wound it round his wrist. With this instrument he thrashed me on the hands, head, face neck shoulders, back, legs, everywhere until I was blistered...He had a way of raising himself upon his toes when he swung the heavy taws round his head and came down upon his feet with a spring, giving the cuts slantingly.." The Book of Discipline had specifically forbidden that children should be struck "at any time or in any case on the head or cheeks" but it was now an accepted practice.

As a shabby boy from a poor home, Alexander was bullied all the time, even when play acting he was given the part of a "radical" which gave the other boys the chance to turn on him and tear his clothes. The trouble was that the schoolmaster dare not intervene with his gentlemen students; one of them "having the run of the school, his father being its chief patron and landlord of the house" did exactly as he liked. The lads from the big houses complained that he was dirty, and he was removed like a leper and put in a room by himself for six weeks. Other ragged boys suffered equally. In spite of the bullying and beating, Alexander did learn to read and write, and there was a circulating library started by an enterprising Mr Samuel Brown of Haddington, which completed his basic education.

At fourteen he was working in the fields in the summer, in the winter breaking stones and carting them; "the stones were hard water-worn fragments gathered from the farm land" and very difficult to break. In 1825 there was a financial slump and people who had left the countryside were coming back, so work was hard to find. In June Alexander was working in the lime kilns, walking two miles to start at three or four in the morning on a day's work at the kilnhead, where he was daylong enveloped in smoke as he threw in stones and coals. Lime for the land was in urgent demand and farmers would gallop to the pits with their carts in order to be first served.

There followed jobs in sawmills, stone quarries, and at twenty in a nursery garden in Edinburgh where he slept in a recess of the bothy kitchen; his diet all along was the normal one of a labourer, oatmeal porridge with skimmed sour milk, potatoes and salt. By this time he had read a great deal, and applied for a job as a librarian but was laughed at for "my thick shoon, trousers of corduroy, coat of

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fustian and bonnet of blue." Like many others his last desperate act was to enlist, where he was duly bullied again, and ended by being so severely flogged that it became a cause celebre.

Considering this not exceptional life; the poverty at home, the bullying and beating at school, the endless underpaid overworked years of the early teens, where his growing body was sustained on oatmeal and potatoes, the bullying and flogging in the army; it is extraordinary that Alexander and his fellows remained sane. Perhaps many of them did not, statistics do not say, though tuberculosis took its toll on the overworked and underfed. George Combe had informed the eighty thousand readers of his *Constitution* that the present methods of employment were an "aberration", in which, if nothing was done, "the vast body of the people shall for ever remain in a condition little superior to that of working animals."

Combe's *Constitution*, and the following year Lyell's "**Principles of Geology**" were seed-corn books for Robert, as for many others. They turned his mind away from the fascinations of the past to the equally rivetting discoveries of the present. He did produce another book for the *Miscellany*, the life of James 1st, a charming but lightweight account of a reign, but then no more. In the second decade of his working life, roughly 1830 to 40, he became an essayist and educator, enormously influential in the pages of a journal that broke all records in its sales.

The young man who proposed to Anne Kirkwood did not foresee the way his life was going to go, but he was confident in his own ability. The bootstraps with which he had pulled himself from poverty to relative comfort were still at his fingertips, still strong and serviceable. Tory ascendancy was over, Scott a sick man, and in spite of the obvious distresses only too visible both in town and country, there was a reviving, reforming spirit abroad. Lyell with his geologists hammer, Combe with his brain scanning, were turning upside down old theories. The earth was much older and man a great deal more complicated than was supposed; more complicated, but more in control, freer to manage his destiny. Lyell was right, Combe basically wrong, but the exaggerations of his phrenology nevertheless produced some truths which could be built on by more careful thinkers.

Robert became a friend of both Combe and Lyell, and though his addiction for phrenology lessened with the years, his passion for geology never, he penetrated to the essence of both disciplines to extract and mould a set of firm beliefs for himself. During the next ten years, in the pages of the **Journal**, and in the **Tracts** and **Information for the People** which followed, he passed on to his hundreds of thousands of readers what he was learning; matters of great importance in all their lives on such subjects as infant rearing, crime and punishment, population control, hygiene and health, economic management, the advantages of emigration. Most of what he said was well ahead of his time. It took twenty years for legislation to catch up with his and William's proposals on the subject of education; in their outrage at the idea of fagging in private schools a hundred and fifty years.

It seems arrogant now, that one man should consider himself an expert on so many subjects, even a man as clever and hardworking as Robert. But Victorians found no difficulty with the idea. As in the case of John Stuart Mill "Human affairs and human knowledge, however complex, seemed still within the grasp of a single human brain, fortified by continual training and untiring effort." Both Mill and Robert Chambers broke down under the strain of their efforts, but picked themselves up and continued

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with unabated enthusiasm. Both were "driven" in a sense; what workaholic is not? Yet neither slithered over surfaces, or gave to their readers anything but the best of deep research, and deeper, more penetrating thought.

In 1829 when Robert asked Anne to marry him, he was a handsome and ambitious suitor, but nervously embarrassed about his mother running a "hotel" and with little of substance to offer her. She on her side does not seem to have brought a "tocher"; she was an orphan living with an aunt, where they both settled after the wedding. Robert was offered the job of editor of the **Edinburgh Advertiser** soon after they were married which produced a steady income for two years.

After that, with the launching of the **Edinburgh Journal** he was never employed, always an employer. He became increasingly, exhaustingly busy, and more and more absorbed in glaciers and sea-margins, but the historical past continued to fascinate him; its songs and ballads, its writers and royalty. Though he toyed with the idea of living in London, his roots were too firmly Scottish. George Eliott in a letter describes him as having a strong Doric accent, something educated Scots of his day were tending to disguise. He travelled to France, Scandinavia, Iceland and the States, but always in search of information, always to return to the country he loved; though he despaired of its church, its unprovided for poor, its lack of drains, its cruel schools, its harsh laws. His influence in improving all these areas can hardly be over-estimated.

Never a radical, always cautious, nervous of upsetting one balance before another had been put in place, he was in fact the unlikely upsetter of the whole social order, human and animal. He fired the first shot in a battle that was finally to wrest science from the consecrated hands of the clergy, and in doing so to allow truth to emerge from centuries of sacred obfuscation. Because of his courage, others more memorably praised, were able to rout the religious rump who still claimed to have divine approval for their refusal to accept change. For Robert Chambers to write the book which inaugurated the biggest change in his or almost any other century's world view, is both personally and historically something of a miracle.