

LITERATURE AND
THE CAPITAL CITY

*The Gable-Ends
o' Time*

by **James Robertson**

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UNESCO City of
Literature





For centuries Edinburgh's Old Town has been the heart of Scotland's cultural, political, legal, religious and civic life. Geology (the Royal Mile lies on a ridge of sedimentary rock protected from the west-east flow of glaciers during the Ice Age by the harder volcanic plinth on which the Castle sits) and humanity (the site has been continuously inhabited by people for perhaps seven thousand years) have combined to create a place that is like no other. While it is true that the building of the New Town gave Edinburgh a physical appearance that seemed to reflect its divided nature, all the contradictions and confusions, bright spaces and dark corners of that nature already existed in the Old Town, where, according to Oliver Goldsmith (1730–74) in the 1750s, "you might see a well-dressed duchess issuing from a dirty close", and where in the 1780s Deacon William Brodie would dine with respectable citizens by day and go house-breaking with his gang by night.

What the growth of Edinburgh away from its original centre did was to accentuate the differences; and writers, consciously or not, have seized on those differences in their work. Without the contrast between the Old Town and suburbs like Morningside and Newington we would not have had Muriel Spark's Miss Jean Brodie; without the housing schemes, like Pilton and Muirhouse, that grew beyond the suburbs, we would not have had Irvine Welsh's Renton and Begbie. But it is with the Old Town itself, and especially the High Street and Canongate that form the Royal Mile, that we are presently concerned.

Today, as ever, history stretches the length of the "guttit haddie" from the Castle to Holyrood, but there is a new chapter at its foot. The site of the modern Parliament was, and will perhaps continue to be, the subject of much debate, but there is undoubtedly a certain poetry about its location. It has taken its place in a crammed, bustling cityscape that endlessly breathes tradition while also constantly re-inventing itself. No other patch of Scotland has inspired so many words from so many writers, although much of what they have written is far from complimentary.

As early as the late 15th century William Dunbar was imploring Edinburgh's merchants to clean up their "nobill toun":

May nane pas throw your principall gaittis *[gaittis: streets]*
For stink of haddockis and of scattis,
For cryis of carlingis and debaittis, *[carlingis: old fishwives]*
For feusum flyttingis of defame: *[feusum flyttingis: foul quarrelling]*
Think ye not schame,
Befoir strangeris of all estaittis
That sic dishonour hurt your name?

"To the Merchantis of Edinburgh"



And this is a theme that has persisted ever since. In the 1720s the English traveller Edmund Burt (d.1755) found the squalor of “Auld Reikie” almost unbearable. The cook at the inn he stayed in was “too filthy an Object to be described, only another English Gentleman whispered me, and said, he believed, if the Fellow was to be thrown against the Wall, he would stick to it.” Fifty years later, Robert Fergusson (1750–74) gleefully celebrated the things that Burt and other visitors found so off-putting, including the emptying of chamber-pots, the infamous “floovers o Edinburgh”, into the street:

On stair wi tub, or pat in hand,
The barefoot housemaids loo to stand,
That antrin fock may ken how snell
Auld Reikie will at morning smell:
Then, with an inundation big as
The burn that 'neath the Nore Loch brig is,
They kindly shower Edina's roses,
To quicken and regale our noses.

“Auld Reikie”

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), in a letter to his brother in 1821, described Edinburgh as “this accursed, stinking, reeky mass of stones and lime and dung”. And Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94), in his *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes of 1878–9*, wrote of the Old Town as a “black labyrinth” which, though “well washed with rain all the year round”, had “a grim and sooty aspect among its younger suburbs”. “You go under dark arches, and down dark stairs and alleys. The way is so narrow that you can lay a hand on either wall; so steep that, in greasy winter weather, the pavement is almost as treacherous as ice.”

This physical sense of descending into gloom, and simultaneously into history, is perhaps what makes the old quarter of Edinburgh such a compelling backdrop for modern crime fiction. The father-figure of detectives, Sherlock Holmes, was the invention of an Edinburgh writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), but Holmes was of course based in London. On the other hand, Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus, Alanna Knight's Victorian Inspector Faro, Quentin Jardine's Bob Skinner, and Paul Johnston's 21st-century cop Quintillian Dalrymple have all investigated crimes in or around the Royal Mile. “You get the great perpendiculars of the Old Town that hint at the heights of human achievement, at the same time as the rapid descent to the inferno below”, Johnston has commented. Knight is interested in “the difference in morality between ‘respectable’ Edinburgh and its darker, seedier elements”. “As a city,” Jardine writes in *Skinner's Rules*, “Edinburgh is a two-faced bitch”.



All these sentiments echo Stevenson rather than Conan Doyle. Stevenson grew up in the relatively sedate New Town but was drawn as a student to the howffs and dens of the Old Town. His classic novel of the divided self, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, may be set in London, but there is no mistaking its origins in the career of Deacon Brodie and the topography of Auld Reikie. From earliest memory, Stevenson's affection for his native city was tempered by disgust: "I seem to have been born with a sentiment of something moving in things, of an infinite attraction and horror coupled." Yet the reverse of that dark repulsion was the surprise and hope that Edinburgh is to this day still capable of delivering: "You peep under an arch, you descend stairs that look as if they would land you in a cellar, you turn to the back-window of a grimy tenement in a lane: – and behold! you are face-to-face with distant and bright prospects. You turn a corner, and there is the sun going down into the Highland hills. You look down an alley, and see ships tacking for the Baltic."

Some of the most memorable scenes in Scottish literature are set in and around the High Street and Canongate. Sir Walter Scott's sprawling novel *The Heart of Midlothian* begins there, and in the vivid opening chapters the city itself becomes almost a living participant in the Porteous Riots of 1736. Scott portrayed old Edinburgh over and over again, in his epic poem "Marmion" and novels like *The Antiquary* and *Guy Mannering*, the latter set in the 1780s when "the great bulk of the better classes, and particularly those connected with the law, still lived in flats or dungeons of the Old Town". Mr Pleydell, the lawyer whom Colonel Mannering first encounters in a tavern on a Saturday night playing "the ancient and now forgotten pastime of High Jinks", is clearly influenced by his surroundings when he remarks, "In civilised society, law is the chimney through which all that smoke discharges itself that used to circulate through the whole house, and put every one's eyes out – no wonder, therefore, that the vent itself should sometimes get a little sooty." His lively mind is entirely at home amid the twists and turns of the Old Town:

And away walked Mr Pleydell with great activity, diving through closes and ascending covered stairs, in order to attain the High Street by an access, which, compared to the common route, was what the Straits of Magellan are to the more open, but circuitous passage round Cape Horn.

Look at a map of South America and the aptness of Scott's analogy is immediately seen.

Scott's contemporary James Hogg (1770–1835) captured the atmosphere in a different way, in *The Private Memoirs And Confessions Of A Justified Sinner*, with his disturbing description of George Colwan being stalked by his malevolent half-brother Robert "in the gallery of the Parliament House, in the boxes of the play-house, in the church, in the assembly, in the streets, suburbs, and the fields"; all of which leads to a confrontation between them in the mist on the summit of Arthur's Seat.



Hogg's novel is full of nightmarish mystery, the product, at least in part, of its Edinburgh location. There is a confluence of reality and fantasy in the Old Town, an inter-lacing of the ancient with the modern that is a constant spur to the imagination. The precision of law is enveloped by the fog of legend through which poke the insistent reminders of history: "This rortie wretched city / Built on history / Built of history", as Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915–75) put it. This may be the domain of the Court of Session, the City Chambers, Dynamic Earth and now the concrete, glass and granite curves and angles of the Parliament, but it is also filled with echoes and glimpses of Brodie, Burke and Hare, Major Weir, Jenny Geddes, Rizzio, John Knox, James Boswell and Edinburgh's own laureate Robert Fergusson.

Fergusson was the direct heir of a revival in Scots verse begun by the wigmaker turned bookseller Allan Ramsay (1684–1758). Ramsay published collections of medieval Scots poetry, including work by William Dunbar (mentioned earlier), and generated a widespread interest in Scotland's literary heritage. He wrote verse of his own, of varying quality, and established the first circulating library in Britain, in 1736, in the Luckenbooths in the shadow of St Giles. He also, briefly, opened a theatre in Carruber's Close, but the magistrates closed it down. Ramsay might have been a one-off, but fourteen years after his death the young clerk Fergusson burst into Scots verse in *The Weekly Magazine*, prompting one reader to ask "Is Allan risen frae the deid?"

Through some sixteen poems he composed in Scots between 1772 and 1773, Fergusson preserved the street life of Enlightenment Edinburgh for ever, in all its noisy, smelly, riotous variety. He is the best tour guide available if you want to sample New Year and Halloween revelries, horse-racing on Leith sands, election bevvy and brawls, the heat and din of Luckie Middlemist's oyster tavern in the Cowgate, and drunken escapes from the Lochaber axes of the town's police force, at that time mainly composed of retired Highland soldiers:

And thou, great god of *Aqua Vitae*!
Wha sways the empire of this city,
When fou we're sometimes capernoity, [*capernoity: irritable*]
Be thou prepar'd,
To hedge us frae that black banditti,
The City Guard.

But Fergusson's exuberant verses disguised a tendency towards depression – which again perhaps reflects something of the Old Town's contradictory nature – and he died in poverty in the city Bedlam at the age of twenty-four. He, more than any other writer, influenced Robert Burns, who turned to writing in Scots on discovering Fergusson's poetry; and it was Burns who paid for a stone to be erected in the Canongate kirkyard to mark the grave of the man he called "my elder brother in misfortune, / By far my elder brother in the Muse".



Over the centuries, Fergusson has continued to attract and inspire other writers, notably Stevenson ("I believe Fergusson lives in me", he claimed), Robert Garioch (1909–81) and Sydney Goodsir Smith. Finally, and fittingly within days of the opening of the new Parliament, he has reappeared on his old streets, in the form of a splendid statue by David Annand. He is hurrying down the Canongate towards Holyrood, and it is tempting to imagine that he is composing some mischievous satire on those he will find there.

What sustains the tension between tradition and innovation, between dream and reality, that seems such a part of the Old Town's character? Is it the presence of a half-wild mountain so close to the city centre? Is it the area's ability to absorb the Festival, the Fringe, ghost tours, street artists, and tens of thousands of visitors while still having an indigenous population going about their daily lives? Perhaps it is simply that so much history has occurred in this ancient core of Edinburgh that nothing any more surprises it, while it continues to surprise us, its temporary residents and custodians. Norman MacCaig (1910–96) captured this in several of his poems. In "Edinburgh Spring" he writes of the Old Town tenements at night making a "Middle Ages in the sky", a place where "Time coughs his lungs out behind a battered door":

There craggy windows blink, mad buildings toss,
Dishevelled roofs, and dangerous shadows lean
Heavy with centuries, against the walls...

Or, in "Old Edinburgh", he contrasts the triumphal progress of one image of the past with the grim crawl of another:

Down the Canongate
down the Cowgate
go vermilion dreams
snake's tongues of bannerets
trumpets with words from their mouths
saying *Praise me, praise me.*

Up the Cowgate
up the Canongate
lice on the march
tar on the amputated stump
Hell speaking with the tongue of Heaven
a woman tied to the tail of a cart.

And history leans by a dark entry
with words from his mouth
that say *Pity me, pity me*
but never forgive.



Now the core has sprouted a new Parliament, a bigger, brasher building than the old one up the hill where lawyers still perambulate beneath the hammerbeam oak roof. It has a burgeoning literary quarter too, with the Scottish Poetry Library, Scottish Book Trust and Scottish Storytelling Centre all within a short walk of Holyrood.¹ The possibilities of Auld Reikie are endless, just as the possibilities of the Parliament are, or should be, endless. Think of the astonishing image created by Lewis Spence (1874–1955) in his poem “The Prows o’ Reekie”, in which he pictures “this braw hie-heapit toun” sailing off like an enchanted ship, and anchoring at Venice, Naples or Athens:

The cruikit spell o’ her backbane,
Yon shadow-mile o’ spire and vane,
Wad ding them a’, wad ding them a’!

A hoose is but a puppet-box
To keep life’s images frae knocks,
But mannikins scrieve oot their sauls
Upon its craw-steps and its walls:
Whaur hae they writ them mair sublime
Than on yon gable-ends o’ time?

Or think of the lofty, ambitious “passionate imagining” of Hugh MacDiarmid’s 1921 poem “Edinburgh”:

...Edinburgh is a mad god’s dream,
Fitful and dark,
Unseizable in Leith
And wildered by the Forth,
But irresistibly at last
Cleaving to sombre heights
Of passionate imagining
Till stonily,
From soaring battlements,
Earth eyes Eternity.

Or, again, think of the challenge in Kathleen Jamie’s poem of 1999 “On the Design for the New Scottish Parliament Building by Architect Enric Miralles” – a title longer than the poem itself, which simply says:

An upturned boat
– a watershed.

¹ In 2004 UNESCO designated Edinburgh as the world’s first “City of Literature” under its Creative Cities network. See www.cityofliterature.com