Print Culture in Scotland, 1500-1900:

The printing press arrived in the British Isles in 1475, when William Caxton, an English merchant working on the Continent, set up a press at Westminster. It would take a few centuries, though, until printing really established itself in Scotland. But what did people in early modern Scotland read? And what was being written in and about Scotland?

A 'Print Revolution'?

What effect did printing have on society?

"Print Revolution." "Age of Communications." These are some of the terms that have been used to describe the period after 1400. Historians, however, debate exactly how transformative printing was for society. Certainly, the number of printed materials available rocketed. By 1704, for instance, there were almost 44000 newspapers being sold every week.[1]

More people could read and write too. One example is the fascinating notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, just an average wood-turner living in the 1600s, who wrote about the news, his dreams, his worries, his children, his business, things that happened around him. Authors and bookworms everywhere will probably relate to his struggle to stay away from reading and writing:

> *"as for bying any more books to wright in I am resolved to by no more because I have often sayd it and have also… wretten that I will write no more books"*[2]

In the end, he wrote 50 notebooks.[3]

Rulers were also taking advantage of print. After shutting down the monasteries, Henry VIII printed tracts like *A Glasse of the Truthe* to gain support for his religious policies.[4] One hundred years later, the Parliamentarians printed *The Grand Remonstrance* detailing all their complaints about King Charles I. Print was so good at circulating ideas, in fact, that these same rulers also complained about it!

But there were a number of things restricting print too, like poverty and illiteracy. Between 1640 and 1760, farmers in lowland Scotland had an illiteracy rate of 83%, almost double that of Northern England.[5] Some Scots had to go to extra lengths to ensure their children could be educated. Robert Burns' father, a poor farmer in Alloway, made a deal with the local schoolteacher to provide free lodging on his farm in return for tuition. Had he not, one of Scotland's greatest writers may not have been able to write at all.

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[1] Atherton, I., 2003. The Press and Popular Political Opinion. In: B. Coward, ed., *A companion to Stuart Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell, p.92.
[2] Wallington, N. & Booy, D., 2007. *The notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654 : a selection*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p.9.
[3] Ibid., p.7.
[4] Wooding, L., 2014. Catholicism, the Printed Book and the Marian Restoration. In: V. Gillespie and S. Powell, ed., *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476-1558*. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, p.313.
[5] Houston, R.A., 1985. *Scottish literacy and the Scottish identity : illiteracy and society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600-180*0, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.36.

Executions, prophesies, and ballads

What did people read in early modern Scotland?

Much of what was printed in Scotland at first was just a reprint of English material. Before 1650, the Scottish industry was dominated by the print house of Englishman Evan Tyler which was then sold to the London-based Stationers' Company.[6] It wasn't until the 1690s that newspapers, for example, really took off in Scotland, with such new titles as *The Edinburgh Gazette*.[7]

The same was true of reading for pleasure. One popular reading item was the speeches of criminals being executed at Tyburn.[8] Breath-taking confessions of such criminals as the Sussex man Henry Jackson, who "murthered his own mother, and robb'd the house" were consumed with hunger by readers.[9]

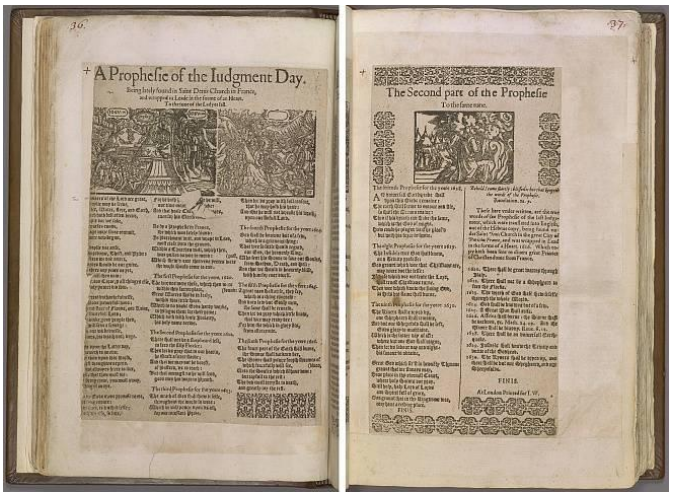

Figure 1 - A seventeenth-century ballad of a prophesy

Also popular were reports of strange occurrences, or divine prophesies, like this very long title: *A Warning to England: being a True and Wonderful Relation of a Flaming Sword which was seen in the Air, in an Amazing Manner, on Monday last between Two and Three in the Morning, near Stretham in Surry*, which was reprinted in Edinburgh in 1698. Nor were Scots free from such grim predictions themselves; in 1717 the Edinburgh press printed *Scotland's Timely Remembrance. Or Warnings from Heaven. To Vile Sinners on Earth.*[10]

Chapbooks, which were a single sheet of folded paper, began to circulate Scotland around 1680. They contained stories, rhymes, ballads, 'penny godlies', eulogies, and more. Some of the stories were centuries-old English classics like *Bevis of Hampton*, or the more recognisable *Robin Hood* and *Tom Thumb*, but Scottish printers also took from their own history.[11] Rhymes about the Battle of

[6] Spurlock, R.S., 2011. Cromwell's Edinburgh Press and the Development of Print Culture in Scotland. *Scottish historical review*, 90(2), pp.180-1.
[7] Atherton, 2003. p.93.
[8] Fox, A., 2020. *The Press and the People: Cheap Print and Society in Scotland, 1500-1785*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.434-5.
[9] Fox, A., 2013. 'Little Story Books' and 'Small Pamphlets' in Edinburgh, 1680-1760: The Making of the Scottish Chapbook. *Scottish historical review*, 92(2), p.225.
[10] Ibid., p.224-5.
[11] Ibid., p.213

Bannockburn, today most remembered from Robert Burns' 1793 poem *Scots Wha Hae*, had existed since 1314; another ballad about the Siege of Berwick has been around since 1234.[12]

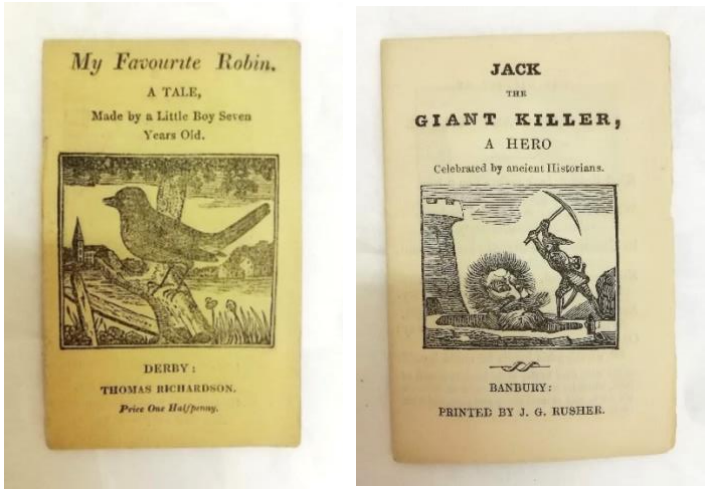

Figure 2 – chapbooks from our collection.

The "bloody crew" and the dreamy Highlands

How was Scotland represented in print?

In many English ballads, stereotypes about Scots were spread, and Scottish terms like "jockey" and "blue bonnet" were adopted and reused as pejorative names. Scots were depicted as traitors and rebels for their support of two claimants to the throne, the "Old Pretender" and then "Bonnie Prince Charlie". Since both of them were exiles living in Catholic France, the memory of the "Auld Alliance", the historic alliance between Scotland and France against England, was reignited, fuelling distrust.[13]

> *Those villains who have the Arch-Bishop slain*
> *For certain are got amongst this train*
> *Then let us march on with might & with main.*
> *with a fa [la la la la lero].*
>
> *We'l make the proud Rebels for to rue*
> *As sure as their bonnets are made of blew,*
> *Since that they are such a bloody crew.*
> *with a fa la la la, la lero.* [14]

This particular ballad was inspired by the murder of James Sharp, Archbishop of St. Andrews, by radical Presbyterians in 1679. It was followed by an uprising of around 8000 Covenanters against King Charles II, which ended in defeat at the Battle of Bothwell.

The Scottish Jockey was represented in English ballads as a bit of a ladies' man – too scandalous for eighteenth century society. In one ballad from around 1750 called *Jockey's Escape from Bonny*

[12] Henderson, T. F., 1910. *Scottish vernacular literature : a succinct history*, Scotland: J. Grant, p.350.
[13] Fox, A., 2016. Jockey and Jenny: English Broadside Ballads and the Invention of Scottishness. *Huntingdon Library Quarterly,* 79(2), p.204.
[14] Ibid., p.203-4.

*Dund*ee, Jockey is driven out of Dundee for robbing a man and having a fling with the minister's daughter:

> *Her Dadd would have me to make her my Bride,*
> *But to have and to hold, I could never endure,*
> *From bonny Dundee this day I will ride,*
> *It being a Place not safe and secure.*[15]

An entire cast of Scottish characters like Willy and Jemmy, and Nanny and Peggy, was created. English writers also came up with their own "Scottish" vocabulary: *Ise* for *I*, *gin* for *gone, kens* for *knows*, etc.[16] It is thought that one of the most prolific writers of these ballads, Thomas D'Urfey, never went to Scotland.[17]

In most of the more positive depictions of Scottish people, it was usually "The Lovely Northern Lasse" who was being described. At times, though, Scottish men were also transformed into objects of desire. In the 1634 ballad *Blew Cap for Me*, a long line of English, Welsh, Irish, French, Spanish, German and Dutch courtiers is rejected by a beautiful Scottish girl. Her heart belongs firmly with her "bonny blew-cap". [18] Even Jockey became an upstanding young man who dutifully married his Jenny.[19]

This alternative vision of Scotland as a romantic place gained popularity, particularly in London. The Highlands especially were imagined as an idyllic place of simplicity that contrasted to the urbanized, fast-paced environment of a city like London. Of course, by this point Edinburgh was the second largest British town, but that was conveniently left out of the idealised vision.

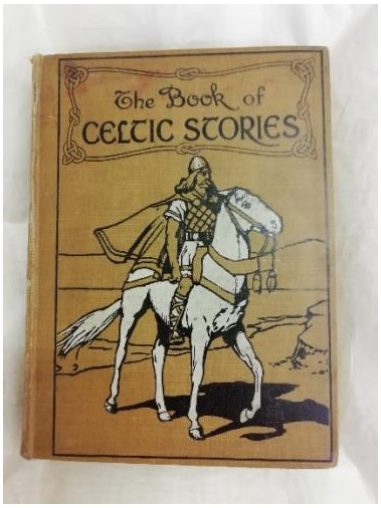

Figure 3 – Celtic heroes and legendary figures were celebrated in books like this

Fireside storytelling to national publication

How did Scotland develop a distinctive print culture of its own?

Some of these romantic ballads were later absorbed into the Scottish canon, and the representations they contained came to be welcomed Scottish personifications. For example, the song *Over the Hills and Far Away* was celebrated in Ramsay's *Tea-Table Miscellany* in 1725 as a thoroughly Scottish song, even though 45 years earlier it had been recorded in Samuel Pepys's collection.[20]

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[15] "Jockey's Escape From Bonny Dundee" (1750?), Huntington Library, EBBA T29096.
[16] Fox, 2016. p.211.
[17] Ibid., pp.210-11.
[18] Ibid., p.206.
[19] "The Scotch Wooing" (1672-1696?), British Library, Roxburghe 4.74, EBBA R227373.
[20] Ibid., pp.217-18.

More generally, a sense of patriotism was infused in much 18th and 19th century literature. Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson, the writers we document in the Writers' Museum, were deeply inspired by local and folkloric tales and the environments where they grew up. Our collection contains a cabinet that stood in Stevenson's childhood bedroom; Stevenson's nanny would very likely have told him stories about the shocking double life of its maker William Deacon Brodie, respected craftsman and councilman by day, scandalous thief and gambler by night. This might have formed the inspiration for his novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.* Thus there are traces of the local in our national literary heritage.

Figure 4

On the other hand, it was often a particular *kind* of Scotland that was celebrated and described in print over these centuries, one which privileged certain aspects and places over others. It's true that there was a growing market for vernacular literature in the 18th century. The printer Robert Drummond, for instance, did have literature in Middle Scots or Gaelic, such as *The Cherry and the Slae*, but the language had been in decline for several centuries.[21] James VI took measures to make sure clan chiefs learnt and spoke English, and Gaels were targeted again in the Highland Clearances that began in the 1750s. In 1755, approximately 22% of the population were Gaelic speakers; just over a century later this had dropped to 6%.[22]

Moreover, it was often elite people that either produced "great" literature, or decided it was "great". Many of these elites had stronger links to the English metropole than to parts of Scotland, making them quite anglicized.[23] It was in their clubs and societies, where they discussed science, literature, philosophy, and social improvement, that the Scottish Enlightenment took place.[24]

Figure 5 - Burns and Scott at a literary society gathering

One such location for these gatherings is our very own Writers' Museum, once the home of the wealthy Lady Stair who hosted a literary society. This painting from our collection is an example of what it might have looked like, with Robert Burns in yellow on the left, and a young Walter Scott on the far right.[25] Burns, himself from a humble background, was made a celebrity by the Edinburgh elite. These high-society people used their wealth and connections to patronise young artists and intellectuals.

It could be said, therefore, that Scottish print culture was led by elites: men, usually wealthy men living and working in the upper circles of society. Certainly these individuals have made important contributions. But the history of Scottish print culture is also much larger than just these great men.

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[21] Fox, 2013. p.215.
[22] MacAulay, D., 1992. *The Celtic languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.141
[23] Phillipson, N., 2019. Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment. In: L. Stone, ed., *The University in Society, Volume II : Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the 16th to the 20th Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp.442-448.
[24] Wallace, M.C., Rendall, J., Whatley, C.A., 2021. *Association and Enlightenment : Scottish Clubs and Societies, 1700-1830*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
[25] Johnstone, W., 1856. *Burns in James Sibbald's Circulating Library, Parliament Square, Edinburgh*. [Oil on canvas].

Women writers and the anonymous producers of cheap print for the peasant masses of old are two large sections of society that are relatively neglected in many discussions.

We are a little guilty of this ourselves: three wealthy men form the focus of the Writers' Museum, but there is more to be learnt from them about the dim corners of literary history than you'd expect. How they grew up, what they read, who they met, how they became published writers – these aspects of their lives also give us some unusual windows onto a much longer and wider history of print.

It began with the English printing press but was soon appropriated by Scotland, for Scotland: this is 400 years of print culture.

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Figures (in order of appearance):

"A Prophesie of the Iudgment Day. / Being lately found in Saint Denis Church in France, / and wrapped in Leade in the forme of an Heart." (1620?), Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge, Pepys 1.36-1.37, EBBA S126138

Chapbooks from collection

Celtic Heroes

Cabinet from collection

Johnstone, W., 1856. *Burns in James Sibbald's Circulating Library, Parliament Square, Edinburgh*. [Oil on canvas].