

# Defining Characters

Alistair McCleery

THERE MAY SEEM little to connect the careers of William and Robert Chambers, founders of the eponymous publishing house and its current descendant Chambers Harrap, and key sustaining values of a distinct Scottish social outlook. However, the Chambers brothers promoted and propagated those values in two ways: through their autobiographical writings, a common enough occurrence for the Victorians for whom the written life provided the occasion for moral instruction; and perhaps more distinctively through their publishing programme, both in terms of the type of publication and in terms of its content.

The specific values illustrated and advanced are an openness to social mobility based on merit and enterprise, seen in the progress of the 'lad o'pairs'; the desire and respect for learning to be found across all social groups for which we can appropriate George Davie's term 'the Democratic Intellect'; a concern for equality of participation in the political process and a concomitant rejection of hierarchy and privilege; and the duty of the successful to put something back into society to benefit those less successful. The Chambers brothers saw these values as the defining characteristics of Scottish culture and those that sustained its distinctiveness. While emphasis upon these values has also been seen at times as supportive of a complacent view of society, it represented for the Chambers brothers a vibrant form of social democratic thinking itself in opposition to the forces of conservatism of the period.

William and Robert Chambers were born into conditions of relative comfort in Peebles in the first years of the nineteenth century. Their father, as a cotton manufacturer and merchant, belonged quite firmly in the caste of craftsmen and shopkeepers that dominated the town. The family's neighbours and friends were the joiners, candlemakers and merchants of the town. They were neither the large landowners on the one hand nor the weavers on the other. Both brothers attended the local high school where they received a general education that was to stand them in good stead in their later career.

Their father bought a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as Robert recalled in

his autobiography, "at a time when works of this expensive nature were purchased only by the learned and affluent." If a spendthrift purchase, then this was also a particularly beneficial one for the boys as it offered them a varied and eclectic diet of reading. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* provided both a stimulus and a response to their curiosity about all aspects of the world in which they lived. The brothers Chambers also had ready access to the stock of the Peebles bookseller, Alexander (Sandy) Elder. Robert wrote: "Sandy was enterprising and enlightened beyond the common range of booksellers in small country towns, and had added a circulating library to his ordinary business. My father, led by his strong intellectual tastes, had early become a supporter of this institution, and thus it came about that by the time we were nine or ten years of age, my brother and I had read a considerable number of the classics of English literature, or heard our father read them."

Nor did this seem strange or exceptional to the Chambers. Their autobiographical writings remark on the spread of learning and the reading habits of a wider range of classes. The story is told of Tam Fleck who owned a well-worn copy of Josephus's history of the Jews and earned a sort of living by moving from household to household in the evenings and reading two or three pages at a time. The history became in Tam's retelling a sort of soap opera: each household would be left in turn at the same point in the story so none spoilt the narrative for the others; and he always ended on a cliff-hanger, leaving his audience in suspense as to the outcome, for example, of the siege of Jerusalem.

However, the Peebles idyll ended when James Chambers's business collapsed, according to the family story because he extended credit to French prisoners of war, debts of honour upon which they reneged. However, it was probably just as much due to the economic depression taking hold as the Napoleonic wars drew to a stuttering close. The brothers were uprooted from the familiar. Their education at the grammar school ended, immediately for William and slightly later for Robert.

In 1813 the family moved into Edinburgh where the Chambers family rented a tenement

A version of this article was first given in the form of a lecture at the Museum of Edinburgh, Huntly House.

flat in West Nicolson Street. Although they had come down in the world, they had not by any means sunk to the bottom. Within the tenement their flat and social position was on the first floor, above the poor widow on the ground floor and below the clergyman's widow and her two grown-up daughters on the second. The third floor was held by a prosperous tailor. In 1814 the family moved once more, to the more impoverished circumstances of Hamilton's Entry in Bristo Street, but again this was not the rock bottom of Fountainbridge, Abbey Hill or the Canongate.

While his father tried to make a living as he could, it was imperative that William find a job. He was just thirteen and without training or experience in anything except reading. As he could find no openings for apprenticeships in his chosen vocation of bookseller, he had to take up lodging as an apprentice to a grocer at Tolbooth Wynd in Leith. It was very quickly realised that the grocer was more in need of a pack-horse than a delicate young boy and William's career in the grocery trade just as quickly ended. Fortunately for him, there *was* a vacancy for an apprentice in the firm of John Sutherland, bookseller in Calton Street, and here William's qualifications and disposition *did* match the demands of the position.

He entered the book trade on 8 May 1814. His rise within that trade began as did the challenges to his qualities of self-reliance and persistence. In 1815 when the rest of the family, including by then Robert, moved to Joppa – “a smoky odorous place, consisting of a group of sooty buildings, situated on the sea-shore half-way between Portobello and Musselburgh... to a small dwelling amidst the steaming salt pans” – William stayed in Edinburgh, taking a lodging, later shared with Robert, at Boak's Land at the West Port. Although only fifteen, he was independent and eagerly learning the business he loved. He sold and delivered books for Sutherland; he sold lottery tickets for Sutherland who was also a State Lottery agent; and he assisted in the administration of Sutherland's circulating library while also using its resources in his continuing programme of auto-didacticism. For example, William taught himself French and would read from a bilingual New Testament while on his Sunday walks.

This form of lifelong learning represented one



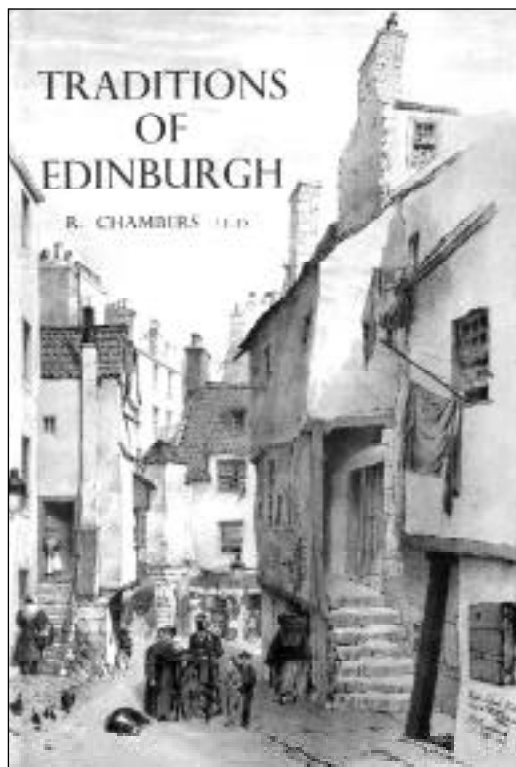
of the inspirations behind his later efforts with his brother to make knowledge cheaply available to all, the promotion of the Democratic Intellect. Indeed, even as an apprentice, William managed to combine supplementing his income with providing “information for all”. He obtained an extra job reading aloud to a baker and his two sons as they prepared the morning bread in their shop on the site of what is now the Balmoral Hotel. “Behold me, then, quitting my lodgings in the West Port, before five o'clock in the winter mornings, and pursuing my way across the town to the cluster of sunken streets below the North Bridge... The scene of operations was a cellar of confined dimensions, reached by a flight of steps descending from the street, and possessing a small back-window immediately beyond the baker's kneading-board. Seated on a folded-up sack in the sole of the window, with a book in one hand and a penny candle stuck in a bottle near the other, I went to work for the amusement of the company.” His daily fee was a bread roll. Robert remained in William's words “half-starved” as he remained at school while sharing his brother's lodgings in the West Port.

In 1818, Robert began a career as a bookseller. Unlike William, he had no apprenticeship; he also had no money to purchase stock. However, William gave him all the advice he could and

encouraged him to use the family's tattered collection of books left over from happier and more prosperous times. Robert took a small shop on Leith Walk opposite Pilrig Avenue and began to sell his books. He recalled later:

The... defying, self-reliant spirit in which, at sixteen, I set out as a bookseller, with only my own small collection of books as a stock – not worth more than two pounds, I believe – led to my being quickly independent of all aid; but it has not been all a gain, for I am now sensible that my spirit of self-reliance too often manifested itself in an unsocial, unamiable light, while my recollections of 'honest poverty' may have made me too eager to attain and secure worldly prosperity.

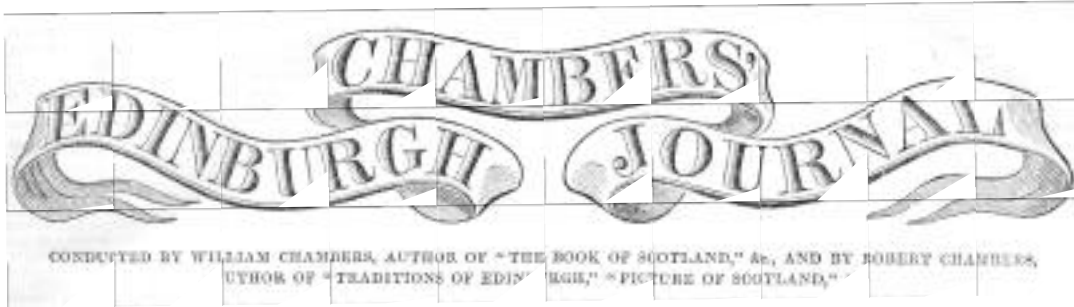
Here we may have the self-consciousness that led to a Carnegie-like desire to contribute something to the good of society in return for its past benefits. William also set up in business for himself when he completed his apprenticeship in 1819. Both brothers began a series of moves across the social geography of Edinburgh which reflected their increasing business success: to India Place, to Broughton Street, closer and closer to the city's actual and metaphorical centre in the New Town. The Chambers brothers had demonstrated their enterprise and range of business and literary capabilities, in moving from bookselling, printing to authorship and publishing.



Robert began writing first with *Illustrations of the Author of Waverley*, published by William in 1823 after an initial rejection by Constable. *Traditions of Edinburgh* followed in 1824, published in parts once 100 subscribers had been canvassed. Of the other works by Robert, none had the impact of his 1844 treatise *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* and yet his anonymity as the author of this work was preserved until 1884. The book provided a comprehensive account of the history of the earth and sketched a misguided view of biological evolutionary development that reflected many of the issues Darwin was trying to resolve. Its detractors came from two opposing camps: the traditionalists like David Brewster who thought the work stood 'a fair chance of poisoning the fountains of science, and sapping the foundations of religion' or Hugh Miller who wrote *Foot-prints of the Creator* as a rebuttal to *Vestiges*; and the Liberals like T.H. Huxley who characterised its author as one of those charlatans who 'indulge in science at second-hand and dispense totally with logic'. Despite its detractors, it succeeded in its aim of popularising science, through sales of over 20,000 copies in the decade after first publication. The brothers were by 1844 at the forefront of publishing material for general consumption, for the Democratic Intellect.

Scots have long seen the placing of a high premium upon education as a sustaining value of their identity, their sense of commonality and difference. Even today in Scotland we boast that we have reached the target of 50 per cent participation in higher education of the available 18–30 population, and we are proud that our Parliament has abolished the upfront tuition fees which were an inhibiting factor to many in taking up the opportunities of higher education. A similar zeal for learning, for its accessibility and its continuing nature, characterises the motivation of many Scottish nineteenth century publishers, including the Chambers brothers. An almost evangelical attitude towards knowledge and its acquisition spurred on the commercial success of Nelson's, Macmillan, Chambers and others. Education was seen as the key to social mobility.

This was not necessarily education in a formal sense, as today, but autodidacticism fuelled by the availability of cheap editions of good works. William realised the need for the latter: "Perusing the memoirs of Robert Burns, James Ferguson, Thomas Telford, George Stephenson, and others who, by dint of genius and painstaking study, raised themselves from obscurity to distinction, we perceive what were their difficulties in getting hold of books; such as they did procure being mostly borrowed from kindly disposed



neighbours.” Where Thomas Nelson and his sons attempted to satisfy that need by the mass production of cheap reprints of ‘good reading’, William Chambers tried a different tack, the magazine or journal. *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, to which both brothers contributed, appeared for the first time in January 1832 as a weekly publication selling at a penny-halfpenny. Its contents represented a deliberate effort to raise the standards of reading beyond those of the other low-priced papers then available.

William set out their credo clearly in the first editorial:

The principle by which I have been actuated, is to take advantage of the universal appetite for instruction which at present exists; to supply to that appetite food of the best kind, in such form and at such price as must suit the convenience of every man in the British Dominions. Every Saturday, when the poorest labourer in the country draws his humble earnings, he shall have it in his power to purchase with an insignificant portion of even that humble sum, a meal of healthful, useful and agreeable mental instruction.

The market responded to the menu. Circulation rose by stages from an initial 30,000 in Scotland to a plateau of 50,000, once the journal was available through a London agent, to a peak of 80,000 copies sold weekly. The aptly named *Chambers' Information for the People* followed rapidly the following year in 1833. *Chambers' Educational Course* appeared in 1835 and from 1859 to 1868 the successive parts of *Chambers' Encyclopaedia* were published. The success of the *Encyclopaedia* can be measured by its longevity. It was published continuously by Chambers until 1944 and thereafter kept in print by other publishers until 1966. It was popular; it was for the people; it did represent a promotion

of the Democratic Intellect.

The Democratic Intellect demanded a democratic society in which merit could find its appropriate place, unobstructed by privilege or hierarchy. Once the lad o'pairts had acquired his education and began to look for opportunities in which he could put both his learning and his energies to use, where was he to find them? This problem exercised the brothers Chambers. If in the pages of the *Journal*, they propounded, implicitly and explicitly, the message that education was the necessary prerequisite to social mobility, to moving out of poverty to prosperity, those pages also revealed their awareness that such mobility could be hampered in Scotland by its class system and by its conservative economic establishment. Emigration provided both the opportunity to seek new economic possibilities, unfettered by the past and its rigidities, and to participate in a society, in both the USA and Canada, that was more open, more democratic, where the franchise was open to all and not just to landowners.

The concern of the Chambers brothers extended beyond the emigrant as economic and social hero. The *Journal* commented on the factors contributing to social exclusion in its day: “inadequate diet, atrocious housing, poor medical care, unhealthy working conditions, alcoholism, lack of sanitation, unemployment, low wages” and more. What to do about the mass of urban and rural poor? If emigration seems at this remove a glib panacea, then it must be compared to the alternative on offer. That alternative came from such conservatives as Thomas Chalmers, leader of the Free Church. In his 1832 book *On Political Economy*, Chalmers wrote of the problem of poverty in fairly bleak and Malthusian terms. Overpopulation was the cause of poverty (not, for example, economic structures) and overpopulation could only be countered by sexual self-restraint. Poor relief or emigration would only “discourage ‘moral restraint’ among the poor”.

The Chambers brothers used the pages of the *Journal* to cite the extraordinary success of their fellow Scots and others in settling the vast, empty spaces of North America in response to such social and religious conservatism. Further, the expectation was that the diaspora would create a return influence: that as more Scots participated in the democratic societies of North America, their experience would create a pressure among those left at home to create and enjoy similar political and economic structures here. In promoting emigration to the USA and Canada, the Chambers were not only seeking to ease congestion and poverty in Scotland but to change the nature of Scottish society. They sought to combat those symptoms of social exclusion listed above through commitment to both lifelong learning and to a more open society.

This demanded their own direct participation in seeking and implementing change. William was the more able politician of the two brothers, as the experience of being uprooted from Peebles had left Robert a retiring, shy individual. William became Lord Provost of Edinburgh from 1865 to 1869. During his period of office, he was responsible for the introduction and operation of the Edinburgh City Improvement Act of 1867 that tackled head on the physical problems of poverty in the Old Town. Many of the higgledy-piggledy cramped and enclosed buildings that had grown up over many years in an unplanned manner were razed and rebuilt to provide more air, more light, more space for their inhabitants. The medieval sanitary arrangements of the Old Town were swept away and replaced with a modern attention to clean water and the safe disposal of waste. The death rate in Edinburgh in 1865 at the start of William's period of office had been 26 deaths per 1000 of the population per annum; by 1882 it had fallen to only 18 deaths per 1000. Infant mortality was reduced and life expectancy raised.

Perhaps mindful of his own experiences in moving from Peebles to Edinburgh, William had improved in a practical and meaningful way the quality of life of the generations that followed. William and his brother embodied, promoted and perpetuated those key values that give life to a Scottish sense of identity. If you were to stand in Chambers Street, which commemorates them, looking up towards the Mound or down towards the new building at Holyrood, you could see those values in action today: in our emphasis on opportunities for all, social inclusion, lifelong learning, internationalism and the duty of the individual to society. We may hear the ghosts of William and Robert Chambers there, perhaps unfamiliar with our contemporary rhetoric, but applauding the sustaining values that underpin it.

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