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Margaret Oliphant

Excerpt

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## WILLIAM BLACKWOOD

AND

## HIS SONS.

## CHAPTER XII.

## PUBLICATIONS.

THE BEARD OF BUCHANAN — EARLY PUBLICATIONS — THE ‘EDINBURGH ENCYCLOPÆDIA’ — THE PUBLISHERS UPBRAID EACH OTHER — THEODORE HOOK — A NEW UNKNOWN — THE AUTHOR OF ‘PEN OWEN’ — POLLOK’S ‘COURSE OF TIME’ — HENRY STEPHENS — ARCHIBALD ALISON — THREE ARTICLES IN A WEEK — LOCKHART’S NOVELS — ‘CYRIL THORNTON’ — MISS FERRIER.

“YOU care nothing,” says Hogg in one of his abusive letters, “for anything that does not come under the beard of Geordie Buchanan.”<sup>1</sup> And there is some truth in the reproach from the beginning of the Magazine, especially from the famous seventh number, in which Mr Blackwood began fully to control and govern it. His attention had been so concentrated on the new organ, that other matters attracted him in a minor degree, and his personal list

<sup>1</sup> Referring to the portrait of George Buchanan, regarded by Mr Blackwood as the typical Scottish scholar, which from the beginning has appeared on the cover of ‘Maga.’

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of new publications was not large. I say his personal list, for through his correspondents he had—according to the custom of the time, which made almost every new book the property of two or three publishing firms in partnership—a hand in most things that were going on. The lists advertised, first on the brown cover of the Magazine, later as business grew in the more decorous pages sewn in with it, are amazingly characteristic of this habit of the period. On one side of the page are, for example, “Books published for Messrs Cadell & Davies and William Blackwood,” while on the other the inscription stands, “Books published for William Blackwood and Messrs Cadell & Davies.” John Murray and William Blackwood, William Blackwood and John Murray, are similarly interchanged; and many other names come in, even that of a local bookseller in Newcastle, part of whose venture the Edinburgh publisher had taken upon him. In this way he had his share in almost all the adventures of the trade, and was the joint-publisher of ‘Childe Harold’ and ‘Beppo’ and ‘Parisina’ (though he refused ‘Don Juan’), and even the ‘Story of Rimini,’ of which his Magazine made such havoc. His, I think, is the second name in the advertising list of works so widely apart as the ‘Cenci’ and some of the books of the Rev. Charles Simeon: a wider latitude could scarcely be. For some of these works in which he had but a share, and that not the chief one, he showed the greatest zeal; but in all his own publications he always acted according to a sound and sober judgment which very seldom erred, taking no one, not even Sir Walter as we have seen, at his own showing, but giving forth his fearless opinion without

respect of persons, in a manner which it was impossible not to respect, whether we agree with it or not. This characteristic quality probably limited his lists, as authors are often deficient in apprehension of the wisdom and the wit so exercised. But his approbation was as warm as his criticism was clear, and he was subject now and then to an access of pure literary enthusiasm which carried his judgment away. He was engaged in some large publications, such as Kerr's 'Travels,' from the very earliest period of his career as a publisher, and was very soon charged with various periodical undertakings, such, for instance, as the 'Edinburgh Encyclopædia,' which dates so far back as 1808. In 1816 Murray, his principal partner for the time, writes to him with "a corrected copy of the last number of the 'Quarterly Review.'" "You must print an edition of 1000 copies as fast as you can," says the London publisher, "for I have only 184 copies left out of the 7000; and I am sorry this is all I can do to reward thy careful anxiety to give you the honour of a Scotch edition."

One of the most important of the early works published independently by Blackwood was the 'Life of John Knox' by the Rev. Thomas M'Crie, a minister of one of those first secessions from the Scottish Church which considered themselves the representatives of the Covenanters and early Reformers, and have of late days proved so useful to writers of fiction in the peculiarities of the Auld Lights. Mr M'Crie had been led by his professional studies to some researches among such original documents relating to the time of Knox as were accessible, at a period when historical research was as yet in its infancy. It is not perhaps a book

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which we should now refer to as the authority, but it was in those days something like a revelation, delivering Knox from the contemptuous indifference with which he had come to be regarded during the reign of the "Moderates" over the Church of Scotland, and making him visible in a more authentic shape than that of the popular demigod, apostle of freedom and democracy, which the fervid but uninstructed imagination of the country had made of its favourite hero. This book was published in 1811, and was highly successful, reaching to a fifth edition in the course of a few years; and in the year 1818 negotiations were going on for the joint publication of the second work of the same writer, the 'Life of Andrew Melville,' a book which does not seem to have attained the same success as that on Knox, the scholar and churchman being a less valiant and perhaps also less interesting figure than the great Reformer. This was the subject of a correspondence between Blackwood and Murray, in which the London publisher expresses himself far from satisfied with the terms to which Blackwood had agreed:—

*John Murray to W. Blackwood.*

LONDON, June 13, 1818.

I am sorry to say that I cannot conceive on what principles of calculation your proposal is formed. At the rate you propose, you take upon yourself the whole risque of the work's success, and the certainty of losing from £50 to perhaps £100, after an edition of 1250 copies has been sold; you suffer yourself to be restricted also in the number of the edition and the price of the book, things which, when large sums are given, should in fairness be left to the discretion of the publisher. You spoke at first of the moderate terms that would be expected, and you are planning the highest I ever remember. A

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## A DISPUTED ESTIMATE.

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good poem, you know, or a good novel, is adapted to all classes of readers, and there is ample room for speculation in the unlimited classes of purchasers. In my opinion your terms are infinitely higher than those for the 'Tales of my Landlord.'

The expenses of paper and print will be at least	£400
Add to this for author	525
	<hr/>
	£925
Twelve hundred and fifty at 14s. trade price, is only	875
	<hr/>
Loss	£50

Add advertising and the probable extent of a few sheets beyond Knox, may make this £50 £100.

Now, really, I do not know that I am illiberal in my proposals to authors, certainly I wish to be otherwise, but I will be glad to know your cool sentiments after looking into this statement.

A rash, foolish, and generous Quixote of a publisher, one would be inclined to say. The following was Mr Blackwood's "cool sentiments" after a few days' consideration:—

*W. Blackwood to John Murray.*

20th June 1818.

The principle upon which I thought it advisable to agree to Dr M'Crie's terms was simply this, that, feeling perfectly satisfied as to the value of the work, I did not consider it any great risk, as two editions would be sure to sell, which would leave a handsome enough profit. I considered the terms as high enough, but what is really good is not to be had without paying for it. As to risk, there can be none, as two editions will infallibly sell, let the book be what it will. However, backed by your opinion, I have prevailed upon Dr M'Crie to allow the price to be 24s. As by this means the first edition will produce £1000, I hope you will have no objections to take the half of the book.

"I can see," says Dr M'Crie in a letter without

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date, evidently between these two letters, "that Mr Murray is afraid that I am taking advantage of your circumstances to propose high terms. As he does not know me, I can forgive him this wrong." Blackwood's circumstances were those of a man half drowned in the surging waves that rose around him at the beginning of the stormy career of the Magazine, but bating neither heart nor hope. Mr Murray finally accepted the risk (or "risque," as he always writes it) of half of the book; and thereupon sends a complimentary message to Mr M'Crie assuring him of the gratification he feels in "having the honour to be his publisher"—a kind of tribute which, money considerations apart, and all eventualities considered, Mr Murray was always ready to pay. He also accepted at the same time a share in Hogg's 'Jacobite Relics.' He had a few months previously become part proprietor of Miss Ferrier's novel 'Marriage,' of which Blackwood writes: "I shall be happy to give you the charge of it in London. At the same time, I by no means wish you to publish it unless you yourself should consider it an object, and be willing to advertise it, &c., as you do your own books. I have given you the first offer, and I hope you will accept or reject it with the same frankness." This also Mr Murray accepted with some grumblings as to the price. But there is many a slip between the cup and the lip, and in respect to one at least of these works the London publisher's proceedings were exceedingly trying to his partner in the North. M'Crie's book and Hogg's were not ready, as appears, until the winter of 1819—and here it would seem an extraordinary difficulty occurred. The books were

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## A DELICATE RELATIONSHIP.

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neither advertised nor published in London. "Both authors are wondering not to see their books advertised," writes Blackwood, who seems to have sent off letter after letter without receiving any reply. At last there came a letter from Murray withdrawing from Dr M'Crie's book altogether, and justifying himself by the angry reproach that the book had been published in Edinburgh without waiting for its simultaneous issue in London. Blackwood defended himself hotly from this charge, upbraiding his partner in return for having taken eight days to do what might have been done in as many minutes. "You say," he continues with indignation, "that it is an unjust thing to publish in Edinburgh before publishing in London. I beg leave to correct this; for 'Melville' was shipped eight days before I published here, and it is your own fault if it was not longer delayed." In this uncomfortable way Mr Murray gave up the honour of being Dr M'Crie's publisher, and for a time there was something more than coldness between the heads of the two houses. The 'Life of Melville' was handed over to Messrs Cadell & Davies, and seems to have done tolerably well. It is to be hoped that poor Dr M'Crie, with his small stipend and his large family, received his money in the meantime while London and Edinburgh wrangled over him. A partnership in books was evidently a delicate relationship, and subjected, as Mr Murray would have said, to "risques" greater even than those of ordinary publication. Murray remained a partner in Hogg's 'Jacobite Relics,' which was not very successful, and in 'Marriage,' which was, but in respect of all other arrangements there was a

serious breach—a settling of accounts and a severance of interests.

In the same year Blackwood published Dr Brewster's 'Essay on the Kaleidoscope,' a recent invention of his own, and apparently supposed to be of more importance than it has turned out to be. In October 1818, before the breach above related, I find a letter to Murray with an account of a new undertaking which Dr Brewster had at the same time proposed. "He has quite made up his mind to publish a Journal, and all that I could say to him in the way of tempting him to give a sheet or even more to the Magazine each month, and to receive a large sum for it [was unavailing]. This, he said, would not answer his purpose at all, but he will always be pleased to assist the Magazine, and he thinks the Journal will be of use in this way."

*W. Blackwood to John Murray.*

Dr Brewster entered very fully into the plan of his Journal; and from everything he said and showed me, I think he will make it a most interesting work. I pressed him to say what would be the terms he would expect as editor, and the rate of payment for contributions. He said this might be done in two ways—either by beginning with a small allowance, to be increased according to the sale, or starting at once with such an allowance both to the editor and contributors as would be proper to give, supposing the work successful: for the editor £100 for each number, and ten guineas a sheet.

These terms were not at all approved by Murray, and the negotiations seem to have speedily come to an end. I divine, though the resumption of these negotiations some years later makes the transaction a little perplexing, that Brewster, discouraged, took



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SIR DAVID BREWSTER.

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his scheme to Constable, who became accordingly for some years the publisher of the 'Edinburgh Philosophical Journal,' a scientific magazine of high pretensions. After the 20th number, however (it was published quarterly), in the year 1824, Brewster came back to Princes Street with his scientific wares. That he came in great dissatisfaction with Constable was probably one reason of Blackwood's willingness to accept the venture, though without enthusiasm. He avows frankly that he undertook it with the hope "that I should have more frequent opportunities of urging upon him [Brewster] the necessity of pushing on the publication of the 'Edinburgh Encyclopædia,' which he had delayed and kept back in a way which was perfectly ruinous to all concerned." It was not like Mr Blackwood's usual sagacity to believe that a man who had so neglected one publication would be more diligent when he had two in hand. But the other hopes connected with the new Journal were equally fallacious. He was assured of a sale of 1250—and on this consideration agreed to pay the editor £100 or £115 for each number, besides paying ten guineas a sheet to the contributor. When, however, he found that the sale was not half what had been promised, and that, instead of the very moderate profit which he had been willing to content himself with, in consideration of other circumstances, he had bound himself to a regular and constant loss, the matter assumed a very different aspect. Dr Brewster, when appealed to, would neither release the publisher nor exert himself more diligently. He left Edinburgh calmly, like all the other people connected with the Uni-

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versity, for six months in the year, and drove the printing-house frantic with incessant delays, by which both publications suffered. At last, after many warnings and entreaties, Brewster committed himself so far as to leave Blackwood a loophole by which to escape. The sixth number was not ready for the binders by the stipulated time. This, which would be to us a failure unspeakable, was in those days, when it was rather a feather in the cap of a man of genius to be irregular and unpunctual, no such extraordinary matter. During Gifford's reign over the 'Quarterly,' poor Mr Murray's life was made a burden to him by the exertions necessary to get the 'Review' out at anything like the appointed time, and on more than one occasion I believe a number dropped altogether, and there was a six months' instead of a three months' interval between the publications. Blackwood had not yet been trained into patience by the terrible discipline of driving a team of which John Wilson was a member. Nevertheless he says:—

I most freely admit that in almost any other circumstances I should not have availed myself of this clear legal ground for putting an end to the agreement. But having appealed to Dr Brewster in every way, and shown that by the third article he was bound in honour and (as I still think) in law to grant us relief, I felt no hesitation on insisting strictly upon this very material article, seeing that he insisted on my fulfilling the stipulations in his favour to the very letter.

This matter was not concluded till the year 1826 or '27, and a few years later the 'Encyclopædia,' which was the property of a company of which Dr Brewster was the head, and Mr Blackwood one