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978-1-108-06626-6 - The Book of Old Edinburgh: And Hand-Book to the 'Old Edinburgh Street' Designed by Sydney Mitchell, Architect, for the International Exhibition of Industry, Science, and Art, Edinburgh, 1886
John Charles Dunlop and Alison Hay Dunlop Illustrated by William Hole

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction.

IN the first International Exhibition in Scotland it was thought good to have a representation of 'Old Edinburgh.' Competitive designs were sought and sent in. On the 27th October 1885 the Committee of 'Old Edinburgh' met, and unanimously chose the design marked 'Tolbooth,' and recommended it with confidence for the approval of the General Executive Council. In moving the Report, the Convener of 'Old Edinburgh' said: 'It is only due to the various architects who have competed, to say that the designs were all beautiful, and to tender to them the thanks of the Committee. I have the hope,' he added, 'that the labours of the unsuccessful may not be in vain, for the designs so display the beauty and the unvarying unsameness of Scottish Architecture, that I trust one of the early results of this first great Scottish Exhibition will be a return to a style of building at once suited to the varied scenery and the changeful skies of Scotland, and to the character and history of the Scottish people.'

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To pass to the successful design:—'Tolbooth' was the competition *nom de plume* of Mr. Sydney Mitchell, well known in these later days as the architect in the restoration of the ancient Market Cross of Edinburgh, Mr. Gladstone's gift to the capital of Scotland.

There is a beautiful verse in the Bible which Dr. John Brown ('Rab') prefixed to one of his exquisite essays: 'I praised the dead which are already dead, more than the living which are yet alive.' This is the underlying charm of our architect's design. No one wanted to see the representation of old Scottish Architecture where the reality still exists, or to see a semblance of John Knox's house, or of Allan Ramsay's house, when the veritable buildings can still be seen by taking a walk down the High Street. The buildings chosen to form the 'Old Edinburgh Street' in the Exhibition, and of which the erections there are a faithful reproduction, have all passed away.

There are certain old titles in the Union Peerage Roll of Scotland that are extinct—honoured and once-powerful families that have dwindled out and died, or that vanished in the hideous ruin that followed upon the Stewart rebellions. The buildings now represented in the Old Edinburgh of the Exhibition are like these extinct peerages. Other historical buildings and other historical families remain, but these have gone to dust. In so far, however, as they were pre-eminently the

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[More information](#)

Introduction.

3

scenes where the workers in the building up of the National History lived, and laboured, and died, it is good that their memory be thus honoured; for the history there wrought out, though not unstained by feud and faction, and not guiltless of blood and sin, had in it from the earliest times a stern straining to the goal of good—to the light and might of civil and religious liberty, and

Freedom's battle once begun,
 Bequeathed by bleeding sire to son,
 Though baffled oft, is ever won.

The visitor must note that no specific date can be given for 'Old Edinburgh;' also it goes without saying that the buildings were not contiguous to each other, as now represented; but, though situated in different parts of the ancient city, they had with each other a long contemporaneous existence. The hand of Time, aided by severe conflagrations, and, what was heavier than either, the inroads of our 'auncient innemys of England,' have removed the earlier Edinburgh of Robert Bruce and the Stewart kings. More particularly was this the case with the series of wars, inaugurated in 1544 by Henry VIII., and carried out by his brother-in-law Hertford, to bring about the marriage of the infant Queen Mary of Scots to Edward Prince of Wales. In these inroads Edinburgh suffered severely, and the rebuilding consequent on these devastations has given rise to dis-

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[More information](#)

4 The Book of Old Edinburgh.

crepancies. In the first of these wars the chief city gate to the east was blown up. The Nether-Bow Port, which is represented in the Exhibition, and by which the visitor will enter, was the last of the series—built in 1606 and destroyed in 1764.

To grasp the 'Old Edinburgh' period, it is necessary to think of the tide of history that has swept through these successive gates: the earlier Stewart kings, brilliant, brave, fated; the Reformation Age, with its actors and workers—Mary of Guise, Cardinal Beaton, Mary the Beautiful, Darnley, Bothwell, Rizzio, Murray, Morton, and that one other man who dwarfs all his contemporaries, John Knox—he who disestablished the Church of Rome in Scotland, and died without ever having feared the face of man; then follow the sage Buchanan, his pupil James VI., and George Heriot, whose *¶ Distribute cheerfully* has come down all the Edinburgh generations; then Charles I.; the last sad entry of Montrose; Cromwell with his stern but impartial rule; the Restoration times of the later Stewarts; the great Argyll and the unyielding martyrs of the Covenant; then the glorious Revolution; the pioneers of Scottish emigration in the Darien Scheme, so energetic, so hopeful, so doomed; the times of Queen Anne and the Union; the Georgian era; the Rebellion of the '15, Sheriffmuir, and the Standard on the Braes of Mar; and the Rebellion of the '45 under Prince Charlie—the last

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[More information](#)

Introduction.

5

of his race who entered the northern capital as a gated and a walled city.

This may be held to be the boundary line of the Old Edinburgh' period, for the destruction of the Nether-Bow Port synchronises with the foundation of the New Town on the heathy moor of the Lang Gait in the earlier years of the reign of George III.

The buildings in the 'Old Edinburgh' of the Exhibition are the buildings of Edinburgh within her gates and walls; and in that earlier Edinburgh every stone, almost every step, is historical. Besides her dower of beauty, the Capital of the North has ever possessed an individuality more marked than that of any other city in the Empire. Much of this may be owing to the nature of the country and the character of the people; but very much is due to the genius of Sir Walter Scott, 'her chiefest scribe and recorder,' who has revealed the strong lights and the dark shadows of Scottish story, as with a Rembrandt light, to a reading world.

To that reading world, from the north to the farthest south, and from the east to the most distant west, we offer some representation of the scenes where that Scottish History was lived and enacted; for in so far as that history was pure and honest, fearlessly God-fearing and true, it has given our country its place among the nations.

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Nether-Bow Port.

IN the extended city wall, called the 'Flodden Wall,' there were six principal gates. The chief of these was the Nether-Bow Port, which separated the city of Edinburgh from the burgh of the Canongate, at the conjunction of Leith Wynd and St. Mary's Wynd. It was the principal entrance to the city from the east, more especially London, and from the seaport Leith by Leith Wynd. The King's highway continued to be by the Canongate and the High Street till the new eastern approach by the Regent Arch was opened in 1817. There were three successive Nether-Bow Ports. There are no representations of the two earlier gates, but we know that the second was thirty yards nearer John Knox's house than the last of the series, which was taken down on 9th August 1764, the material being sold by public auction.

This building was very massive, and was one of the greatest adornments of the city. It is said to have been almost a duplicate of the ancient Porte St. Honoré at Paris, and it is not unlike some of the old city gates in Holland. The bell was cast at Campvere

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[More information](#)

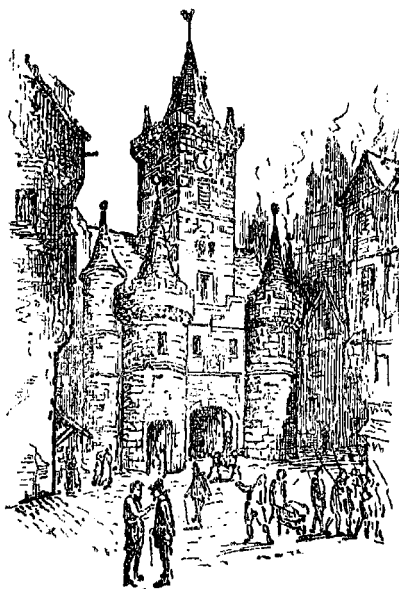
Nether-Bow Port.

7

in Zealand at the same time as the bells of St Giles'. The successive Nether-Bow Ports sustained a very important part in the city's history, both in the pageants of peace connected with the state entry of the different Stewart sovereigns into the capital, and also in the manifold international wars and city 'tuilzies.'

The Porteous Mob in 1736 had nearly settled the doom of the Nether-Bow Port. The Go-

vernment, enraged at the insult offered to Queen Caroline's Regency while the King was absent in Hanover, offered large rewards for the apprehension of the ring-leaders. Enraged at their non-success, a Bill was introduced into the House of Commons, in which, amongst



NETHER-BOW PORT.

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[More information](#)

8 The Book of Old Edinburgh.

other pains and penalties against town and magistrates, there was one clause, to dismantle the Nether-Bow Gate and disband the Town Guard. The Scottish Members in London stood shoulder to shoulder, encouraged by the example of John, Duke of Argyll, who, in the House of Lords, denounced in no measured words the intended



WITH YOUR MAJESTY'S LEAVE, TO GET MY BEAGLES READY.

degradation to the ancient capital of Scotland. 'I will make Scotland a hunting-field,' said the angry Queen. 'Then,' said the Duke, 'I go down, with

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nether-Bow Port.

9

your Majesty's leave, to get my beagles ready.' The stately courtliness of the words was Delphic, the deep reverence of the bow was ominous. Could the name of Argyll be dissevered from the cause of the Protestant succession in spite of his family wrongs? There was a skeleton at the Court feasts of the second George, as at those of Egypt long ago. Was there not growing up at Rome a young prince of the exiled Stewart race—brave, spirited, debonair? What were his possibilities against those of the king's Fritz? Stolen waters were not unsweet to the statesmen of the period. The issues were weighty. The Government gave way, and the matter was eventually commuted into a money payment by the city of Edinburgh to the widow of Captain Porteous.

The after-echoes of the storm were amusing. Edinburgh was allowed to possess her Nether-Bow Gates, but they were to be 'cleekit back'—to



TAKEN BY THE HIGHLANDERS.

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[More information](#)

10 The Book of Old Edinburgh.

stand open by night as well as by day—so that the city might be scoured through by a detachment of the British army when the second Porteous Mob came! Nine years afterwards, and the Nether-Bow Port was taken in war for the last time, the assailants being the Highlanders of Prince Charles's army in the Rebellion of 1745. There must then have been a rush for neat's-foot oil and for the hammermen of the good smith craft of the Magdalen Chapel. The gates were in bad order.



GATES IN BAD ORDER.

No wonder! The successors of Vulcan in Old Edinburgh did their work promptly and well, and the gates were eventually closed. The capture, however, was an easy one. There is some historical haze about the transaction, but—the Provost was a Stewart.

We learn from a table of the 'Common Good' in 1690 that the rent of the apartments over the Nether-Bow Gate was £112 Scots¹—surely, of all houses in neighbourly Edinburgh, the best for a 'School for Scandal' or for gossip! Further, from the 'Funeral

¹ £10 sterling.