

★ FREE ★

BECOMING GEORGE ELIOT  
Marian Evans's letters

EXECUTION BROADSIDES  
Tales from the gallows

# DISCOVER

The magazine of the National Library of Scotland • [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk) • No.43 Spring 2020



## The grace race

Saving Scottish Ballet's video archive before it disintegrates

# BLOODY SCOTLAND

'A dozen great writers. A dozen great places.  
A killer combination.' *Scotsman*



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- 4 NEWS**  
Find out about our latest initiatives and purchases
- 7 SCROLL REVERSAL**  
*Who Taught Her That?* marks Women's History Month
- 10 A GOOD HANGING**  
Tabloid tales from the age of the executioner
- 13 THE GRACE RACE**  
Rescuing Scottish Ballet's video archive
- 16 ON DISPLAY**  
Gordon Yeoman reflects on his time as Exhibition Curator
- 18 BECOMING GEORGE**  
The complex relationships that 'made' George Eliot, above
- 22 RADICAL WAR**  
Looking back on the 200th anniversary of the uprising
- 24 SOUNDS HERITAGE**  
Saving the spoken word
- 28 ALLAN RAMSAY**  
Paving the way for Burns
- 30 THE DATA FOUNDRY**  
Exploiting our digital resources

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WELCOME

Evolving collections

# Digital drive puts focus on future

In our previous issue, we looked back to the 1980s. This issue has a definite forward focus thanks to one word that keeps coming up throughout this magazine – digital.

Technology and the internet have opened up the Library over the past 30 years in ways we would never have thought possible back in the 1980s. And the kind of projects we're undertaking are preserving the written, visual and aural record of our nation for future generations to research and use at a distance.

In our cover story, we talk about how we're helping Scottish Ballet save hundreds of performances that were captured on video tape, a format that was turning to mush. The full digitised record will be available at our National Library at Kelvin Hall facility in Glasgow, with clips to watch online.

Turn a few pages and you come to more preservation work taking place in Glasgow, this time by our Sound Team. The team is turning fragile formats into digital files, giving the soundscape of our nation new life. Then there's our Data Foundry, where our digital resources are being examined and reused by artists and researchers – arriving at new insights and interesting perspectives, and finding a place where creativity and data meet.

We now have one foot firmly in the physical world and the other in the expanding digital world. It couldn't be a more exciting time to be the National Librarian!

**Dr John Scally, National Librarian**  
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# Major step forward for Gaelic digitisation project

**W**e're delighted to welcome Angela MacDonald (Angela MacEachen) as our Gaelic Arts Access Project Officer – a post which is funded by Bòrd na Gàidhlig and supported by An Comunn Gàidhealach to open up access to our Gaelic collections.

Angela is working on tracing rights owners, such as authors and composers, for Gaelic literature as well as music published by An Comunn Gàidhealach – the organisation that promotes Gaelic language and culture and organises the annual Royal National Mòd.

This material is already held in our collections, but obtaining permission from rights owners means we can digitise this body of rich Gaelic material and add it to our website for all to use.

It also gives us an opportunity to collect some stories behind the work

from the people who created it or their families. Older An Comunn publications have already been digitised and are available on our website.

## PRÒISEACT DIDSEATACH ÙR GÀIDHLIG

Tha sinn toilichte fàilte a chur air Angela NicDhòmhnaill (Angela NicEachainn), a bhios air cùmhnant goirid, mar Oifigear Inntigidh Ealainean Gàidhlig. Fhuair an obair seo maoinachadh fialaidh bho Bhòrd na Gàidhlig agus taic cuideachd, bhon Chomunn Ghàidhealach. Bi Angela ag obair air lorg fhaighinn air feadhainn – mar ùghdaran is sgrìobhaichean-ciùil – aig a bheil còirichean leth-bhreacachaidh an-dràsta, air ceòl is stugh litreachais, a tha An Comunn Gàidhealach air fhoillseachadh, thairis air na bliadhnanachan.

Tha e cuideachd a' tabhainn cothrom 's dòcha, sgeulachdan fhaighinn bhon

fheadhainn a chruthaich an stugh, no bho teaghlachan.

Mar bhuidheann, tha An Comunn Gàidhealach a' brosnachadh na Gàidhlig agus dualchas nan Gàidheal agus 's iad cuideachd a tha a' cur a' Mhòid Nàiseanta Rìoghail air adhart gach bliadhna. Tha an stugh ris am bithear a' coimhead mar-thà anns an Leabharlann againn ach, le bhith a' faighinn cead air còirichean bhon fheadhainn aig a bheil iad, faodar an uairsin an dileab bheartach seo a dhidseatachadh agus sin a chur air an làraich-lìn againn. Gu dearbha, bhiodh sin gu mathas gach neach aig am biodh ùidh agus, bhiodh e cuideachd a' ciallachadh nach fheumte tighinn a-staigh dhan Leabharlann, airson sealltainn ris na bhiodh ann.

Tha stugh bhon Chomunn, a chaidh fhoillseachadh bho chionn ùine, air a bhith air a dhidseatachadh mar-thà 's tha e air an làraich-lìn againn.

# Public Talks and Events

## National Records of Scotland

### Reassessing Tartan History

16 April 2020, 12.30-1.30pm

New Register House, 3 West Register Street, Edinburgh EH1 3YT

Dr Sally Tuckett, Lecturer, Dress and Textile Histories, University of Glasgow

The history of tartan is a complex one that touches on rebellion and loyalty, royalty and non-elites, and fashion and function. Its association with Jacobitism and its more recent use as an indicator of national identity means that it is also often ascribed with many romanticised meanings and messages, but its popularity can also be attributed to its versatility and aesthetic qualities. This talk will use the records of William Wilson & Son of Bannockburn, pre-eminent tartan manufacturers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to explore how and why tartan became so popular in this period.

**British Sign Language Interpreter available upon request.**

**Please contact [education@nrscotland.gov.uk](mailto:education@nrscotland.gov.uk) by 2 April 2020 if you would like this service.**

### The social networks of the Declaration of Arbroath

20 May 2020, 5.30-6.30pm

New Register House

Dr Matthew Hammond, Research Associate, King's College London

### Defending the Declaration – tackling misrepresentation

10 June 2020, 5.30-6.30pm

New Register House

Dr Laura Harrison



### The Archivists' Garden – Open Gardens of Scotland

Saturday 25 July 2020, 2.00-5.00pm

HM General Register House, 2 Princes Street,  
Edinburgh EH1 3YY

Admission £3, children free

Join National Records of Scotland in our unique Archivists' Garden, planted with 57 plant species, including: heather, iris, birch, hawthorn, rosemary and the Scottish thistle. All the plants connect in some way to Scotland's collective memory, whether through myth and folklore, heraldry, or association with famous Scots. Visit the garden and find out the role that plants play in our national heritage.



# A DANDY ADDITION TO THE NATIONAL COLLECTIONS

**W**e have filled a crucial gap in our collection of *The Dandy* weekly comic following our acquisition of the first issue. *The Dandy Comic* was launched in December 1937, costing two pennies for 28 pages. It was an instant success, selling more than 480,000 copies.

Ian Scott, General Collections Curator, said: "In many ways, it was the first modern British comic, and should be of great interest to anyone researching popular literature.

"Today, it is estimated there are only around 20 copies of the first edition known to be in existence, which makes this copy one of the rarest items in the Library's collections.

"We were pleased to add this first issue to our holdings – ensuring its preservation for future generations. We're actively filling the gaps in our holdings of British comics and annuals. They tell us so much about the social mores of the time."

However, significant gaps of *The Dandy* in the national collections remain, particularly from 1937 – when the first *Dandy* was published – up until the 1970s. Ian added: "We appeal to anyone who may have pre-1970 editions of *The Dandy* – or indeed its sister publication, *Beano* – to consider adding them to the national collections."

The first editor of *The Dandy* was 25-year-old Albert Barnes, who remained as editor until he retired 45 years later in 1982. He had a large chin, which led many to speculate that his was the inspiration for Desperate Dan's jawline.

As well as the character Desperate Dan, which was illustrated by Dudley D Watkins, issue one of *The Dandy Comic* featured Korky the Cat and Keyhole Kate. It was the first time most readers had ever seen dialogue contained in speech bubbles – up until then, dialogue was mostly



found in the text below the illustrations in British comics.

Watkins's illustrative work on *The Dandy*, *Beano*, *Oor Wullie* and *The Broons* was deemed of such importance to public morale that he was excused war service, but still served as a reserve police constable in Fife during the Second World War.

Dundee-based publisher DC Thomson was known for the 'Big Five' text-based adventure story papers for boys: *Adventure*, *The Rover*, *The Wizard*, *The Skipper* and *The Hotspur*, which were launched in the 1920s and early 1930s.

It was decided to branch out into humour comics, with *The Dandy Comic* planned to be the first in a second suite of titles, followed by *Beano* in 1938, and *The*

*Magic Comic* in 1939. *The Magic Comic* was put on hold in 1941 due to paper shortages during the Second World War. Its editor, Bill Powrie, was killed on active service aged 26. It was relaunched in the 60s as a nursery title.

*The Dandy* and *Beano* were reduced to bi-weekly frequencies during the war, and reverted to weekly in 1949.

It is believed *The Topper* and *The Beezer* were the two other titles suggested for the 'Big Five', but the idea never came to fruition.

The Library holds complete sets of *The Dandy* and *Beano* annuals, which are perennially popular Christmas gifts. Anyone can view these annuals, and early editions of the comics, at our Reading Rooms.

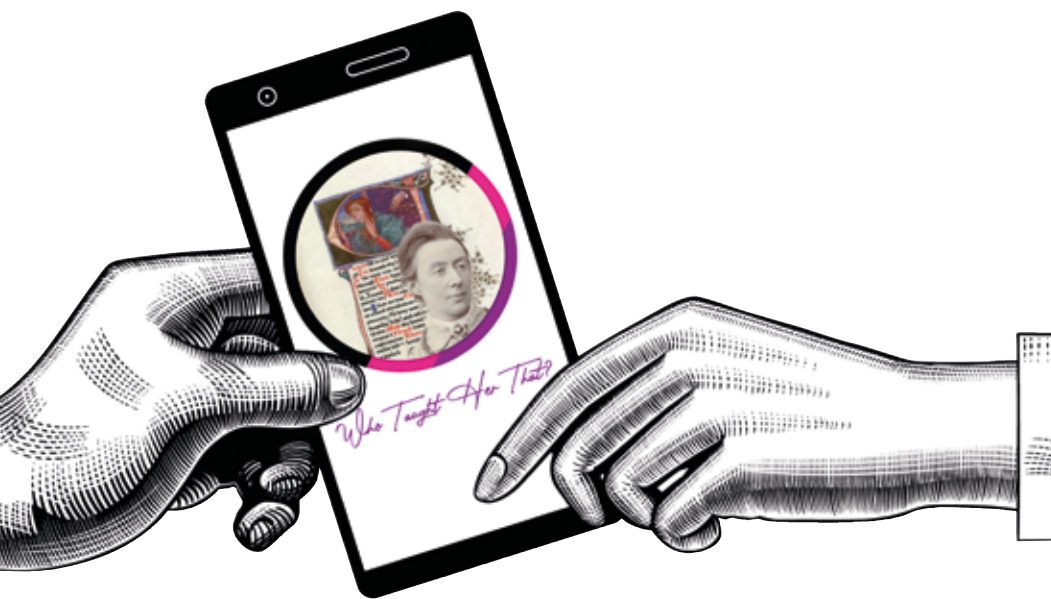


**WORDS:**  
MScR students  
The University of Edinburgh

EXHIBITION

# SCROLL REVERSAL

Juxtaposing the digital and physical contributions women make to the Library forms the centre of the *Who Taught Her That?* exhibition celebrating Women's History Month



The National Library of Scotland prides itself on providing free and easy access to its collections. As technology advances, the digital world has not only become an important part of our everyday lives, it has affected the Library's established practices as more and more of its legal deposit intake is received digitally.

The main question then is how to display something born digital (i.e. material that has been created as a digital resource rather than digitised after creation) as part of a public exhibition? In search for a solution, the Library invited us, a group of Master's students by research following the Collections and Curating Practices Programme, to approach the display of the Library's collections from a digital perspective.

Our response – *Who Taught Her That?* – took the form of an exhibition, located in the Library's George IV Bridge Board Room. Coinciding with Women's History Month and International Women's Day, it celebrated women's contributions to the Library's collections, how the digital age has transformed the manner in which women express themselves, and how audiences can engage with this material.

As a team of five women curators who also enjoy using social media and online platforms to share thoughts and engage with our peers, we noticed that much of women's use of digital resources comes in various forms of advice and so we began exploring the history of different forms of instruction and guidance through the Library's extensive collections. When putting together the exhibition checklist,

we aimed to include as many areas of women's lives as possible, using artefacts which addressed politics, sexuality, health, home life, and growing up.

We were particularly keen to feature the experiences of women living in Scotland and Britain, focusing on the ways in which culture and customs have been passed down to subsequent generations, as well as how they have evolved over time. By placing digital and physical items next to each other, we aimed to highlight and emphasise the contrasts, similarities, and partnerships that exist between different formats as well as the possibilities of each.

One of our main goals was to inspire visitors' participation at the exhibition, which was designed to appeal to every person who identifies as a woman from across all generations and backgrounds. Exhibitions can be associated with glass cases that form a barrier, systems of security, institutional language, and limited opportunities to leave feedback. We wanted to show just how wrong that perception can be. To make the space as welcoming and inclusive, as possible, we used a live feed of advice contributed via Twitter by our guests, held workshops, and created a Conversation Corner, where



visitors could engage with inspirational women guest speakers we had invited to talk about their accomplishments in different spheres of life.

The idea was to encourage people to react to the objects on display and create a discussion around them, which helped the Library and our group better understand what the public would like to see in future exhibitions. One of the main advantages of using digital content to encourage these conversations was its ability to accommodate the inclusion of new perspectives. We could see ideas and discussions evolve in real time.

Visitors walked around the exhibition, exploring the different possibilities for

● One of our main goals was to inspire visitors' participation at the exhibition, which was designed to appeal to every person who identifies as a woman from across all generations and backgrounds ●





**CURATORS**

Left to right: Aija Cave, Meg Dolan, Amy Trantum, Rada Kuznetsova and Melanie Magolan.

BELOW: Evolving portrayals of women

display of the digital and the physical materials, after which they were encouraged to join the Conversation Corner, as well as leave some feedback or share advice of their own and interact further on our corresponding exhibition website. We encouraged people to think about the difference in their perception and treatment of the information they encountered or acquired through both formats. Additionally, we wanted to explore questions regarding the perceived value of physical items in comparison to the digital content, and the reactions people have to them.

This exhibition was a preview to the possibilities that digital now provides for the curators and the public. It explored how in the future, curation could be a more open discussion with the audience at each stage of its production. Social media gives us an opportunity to vocalise our thoughts, experiences, and hopes, offering a greater than ever opportunity to institutions to hear what the public has to say to them. It is our hope that *Who Taught Her That?* encourages viewers

to consider not only the passing-down of advice, in all its forms, but also the role new forms of media and technology can play in the future of the public institutions and the scope of information they will then be able to share with the public.





**WORDS:**  
**Simon McFadden**  
MRes student, Edinburgh  
Napier University

Execution Broadside were the first draft of Scotland's history of capital punishment. **Simon McFadden** takes a look at these bloodthirsty 'tabloid tales' from a bygone age

**B**efore capital punishment for murder was abolished in 1969, the last execution in Scotland was the hanging of a man named Henry John Burnett in 1963.

The death of Burnett marked the end of what was a widely used practice throughout Scottish history, ranging from beheadings to hangings. Public executions were carried out for diverse crimes, from witch-hunts in the 16th century to the punishment of thieves in the 18th century. A version of this history of capital punishment in Scotland is told in 18th and 19th century broadside literature.

Long before the days of social media, 24-hour news channels and radio, ordinary Scots relied on single sheets of paper (broadside), costing one penny, in order to find out what was going on. For around 200 years, up until the mid-19th century, broadsides were the tabloids of the day in Scottish society, an affordable alternative to newspapers for working-class Scots.

Over the past century, the National Library of Scotland has acquired a number of these precious sheets and most of them are now available online through The Word on the Street on the Library's Digital Gallery. This digital resource enables contemporary readers to delve into the past and discover just exactly what the "word on the street" was in bygone days in Scotland. This collection contains broadsides relating to crime, politics, religion and much more.

Public executions were events which Scots attended in large numbers and with great enthusiasm in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some cities got the opportunity

**NO NOOSE IS BAD NEWS:**  
OPPOSITE PAGE: Image contained in a broadside concerning the execution of Elizabeth McNeil in 1835.

# A PENNYA HANGING

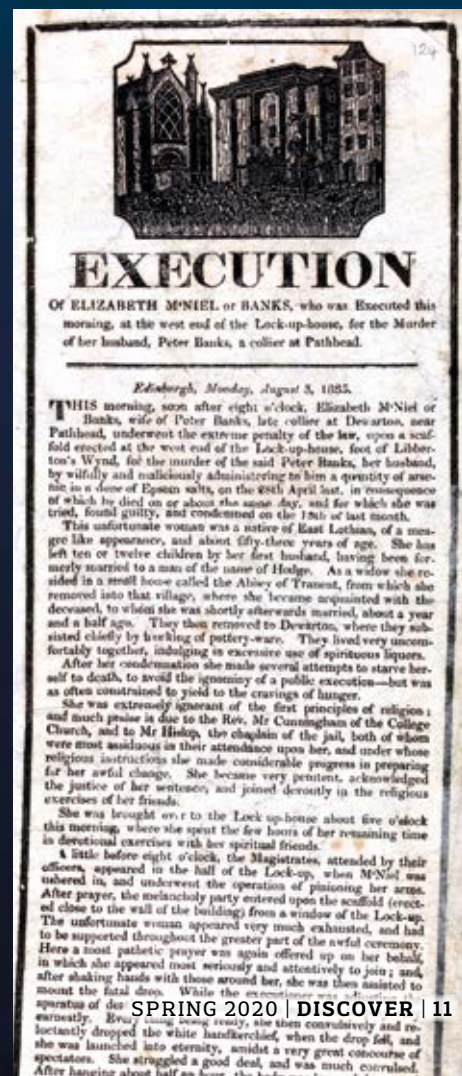
to witness executions more often than others. However, not everyone had the chance to attend public executions and thus they relied on broadsides for details of convicts and the events leading to their execution. The Word on the Street contains 147 broadsides relating specifically to executions and executioners.

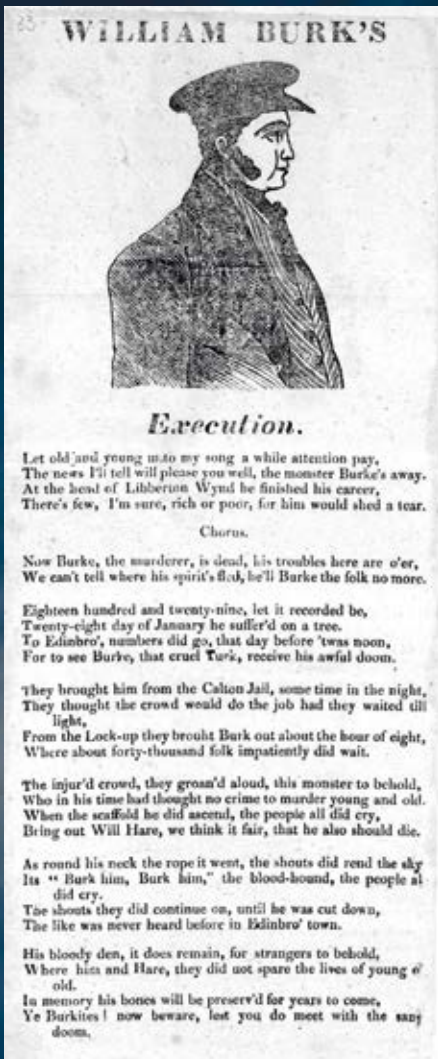
There was more than one way to tell the story of an execution. A number of capital cases concern convicts with very different backgrounds, crimes and circumstances. Public opinion varied, depending on each case, hence these stories of execution could at times be presented differently. Broadside used key adjectives to dictate who was and who was not worthy of public sympathy. While some broadsides told the story of a "melancholic" crowd gathering to witness the end of an "unfortunate" young convict, others told the story of an "ignominious" end of an evil wretch. My findings in the course of research for an MRes degree at Edinburgh Napier University on the history and cultural representation of capital punishment in Scotland indicate that age, gender, religion and nationality were all factored into representation of the person being

## Public executions were events which Scots attended in large numbers and with great enthusiasm in the 18th and 19th centuries

executed. Certain themes, moreover, were consistently prevalent in broadsides, such as the use of religious rhetoric, moral messages and warnings to the public against evil temptations.

Broadsides offer insights into attitudes that existed at the time pertaining to execution and not all are perhaps what we would expect. Executioners had the unenviable task of carrying out the death sentences. Because of their special status, their own deaths warranted more than a formulaic line in a newspaper. Based on the representation in broadsides, hangmen were held in high regard and their deaths were reported





#### BURKE & HARE:

ABOVE: Image contained in a broadside concerning William Burke, noticeably Burke is misspelt "Burk".

BELOW: An illustration of Burke's hanging at the head of Libberton's Wynd in Edinburgh's Old Town



## Unfortunately, not every story told in broadsides can be deemed accurate, and some were riddled with spelling mistakes

as particularly sad occurrences. Scots of bygone days had a particular appreciation of a hangman who could get the job done right. This is evident in the fond report about former Edinburgh hangman Jock Heigh's (John High) death, noting he never botched an execution throughout his career. The same broadside takes aim at an incompetent hangman who was responsible for bungling an execution.

Contemporary audiences can rest assured that dubious news reporting predates modern times. Unfortunately, not every story told in broadsides can be deemed accurate, and some were riddled with spelling mistakes. There is no record to support a number of executions which were reported in broadsides.

Additionally, representations of real executions often blurred the lines between fiction and reality. Having the monopoly on what the majority of the general public knew about convicts and executions, the usually anonymous broadside authors took liberties through presenting sensationalised accounts. They wrote poetic, often humorous lamentations, presented as having been spoken by the convict, as well as songs written to be sung aloud, thus indicating that broadsides served equally to entertain as well as to inform the readership.

The Word on the Street collection contains fascinating broadsides

concerning one of Scotland's most notorious criminals, namely those relating to the execution of William Burke in 1829. Burke is perhaps the most infamous convict to be executed in Scottish history for his involvement in 16 murders, with his accomplice William Hare, in order to supply bodies to the anatomist Dr Robert Knox for money.

The case attracted immense attention and provoked outrage. No other convict in Scotland was the subject of such widespread vilification in print. Whilst some broadsides offered a sympathetic account of convicts, broadsides concerning Burke told the story of Scots reacting to the execution of a monster with a loud "huzza". In fact, the only reported dissatisfaction of the Edinburgh crowd attending his execution was the fact that Hare, having turned King's evidence, had escaped punishment.

Among the other notable cases covered in the broadsides is the one of Mary McKinnon, an innkeeper executed in 1823 for murder. In contrast to the representation of Burke, the press's impression of McKinnon was more likely to elicit compassion through focusing on her troublesome personal history. As detailed in one broadside, she had been disowned by her father, abandoned by her lover and left to raise a child on her own, which placed her in difficult circumstances. Inclusion of these details effectively humanised her and contextualised her crime.

Capital punishment may be a fading memory in Scotland, but it has left its mark on Scottish society. In Edinburgh for example, former execution sites are still marked as historic sites of interest and have inspired the names of several pubs. In addition, stories featuring executed convicts, such as William Burke, Maggie Dixon, Robert Johnston and John Chiesley have stood the test of time and have inspired endless stories that have been told and retold in literature, movies and walking tours.

Burke's skeleton has previously been on display in the University of Edinburgh's anatomical museum. Also, other capital convicts of bygone centuries, such as Johnston, are reported to have been seen roaming the streets of the city as ghosts!

# THE GRACE RACE

Time was running out for Scottish Ballet to save delicate videos of past performances... until it formed a partnership with our Moving Image Archive



**WORDS:**  
Stewart Hardy  
Marketing Officer

**S**cottish Ballet holds a fond place in the nation's cultural life and is one of the world's leading ballet companies. Founded by Peter Darrell and Elizabeth West as the Western Theatre Ballet in Bristol in 1957, it subsequently moved to Glasgow in 1969 and was renamed Scottish Theatre Ballet, changing to Scottish Ballet in 1974. In its lifetime, Scottish Ballet has

amassed a large video archive. As its 50th anniversary approached in 2019, thoughts turned to preserving this precious history. The archive not only contains unique performances from the first 30 years of the company's history, but glimpses 'behind the scenes' at rehearsals and community events.

Scottish Ballet contacted the Moving Image Archive at the Library for our expertise in preserving this important

record and making it available to as wide an audience as possible.

**THE DIGITISATION PROJECT**

Digitising these videos to the highest quality for preservation means that these amazing performances will be saved for posterity. If it is not digitised soon, it will be lost forever. For the Library, this is an opportunity to preserve and make available a unique archive, and also to fill a gap in the national collections – we have no other ballet footage from years past.

Working in partnership, the National Library and Scottish Ballet project team brought in staff including a video preservation technician and a cataloguer. Equipment was purchased, including three high-specification computers and tape playback machines that enabled an efficient digitisation workflow. The project was made possible with funding from donors including the William Grant Foundation and the Foyle Foundation.

Tapes were prioritised for digitisation from an initial visual appraisal using the information on the labels or in the tape boxes, and drawing on the knowledge of colleagues at Scottish Ballet. The digital files will be preserved in perpetuity by the Library with full-length copies available online on our premises to view and enjoy. Clips from each tape are also being selected and digitised to offer a ‘taster’ of the collection to online visitors who may not be able to visit the Library.

**THE RECORDINGS**

“When I first saw the digitisation of Margot Fonteyne dancing in *La Sylphide* I was astonished,” said Scottish Ballet’s Digital Archivist, Sophie McCormick-Gow. “I had never seen this footage of her dancing. Having been at Scottish Ballet when we produced Matthew Bourne’s *Highland Fling* (based on *La Sylphide*) I was instantly able to identify the original choreography, story and style. Fonteyne, whom I had seen in so many photos, was instantly recognisable. She truly is an amazing dancer.”

The archive consists of hundreds of video tapes containing more than 500 hours of recordings. Most are of ballet performances, from classical ballets on stage to short contemporary dance films. There is also behind-the-scenes footage, showing how productions come to life on stage, together with footage of rehearsals, interviews and Scottish Ballet’s community engagement programme.

The collection offers an exciting opportunity for research, as people can compare and contrast the same ballet performed in different decades, locations or with different dancers. Studio or dress rehearsal recordings

complement the performances, occasionally with feedback notes and commentary by the dancers. Kirsteen Connor, Project Cataloguer, has been working with our curators and the Scottish Theatre Archive at the University of Glasgow to enhance the catalogue’s descriptive detail.

Performances feature choreography by Robert North, Ashley Page, Robert Cohan, Jiří Kylián, Frederick Ashton, Kenneth MacMillan, Michel Fokine and George Balanchine with dancers including Ivan Nagy, Adam Cooper, Daria Klimentova and Elaine McDonald.

**THE PROBLEM**

Magnetic media such as video tape relies on machines working sufficiently well to display and copy the material. These machines get harder to effectively maintain as time passes, while the tapes slowly degrade.

The archive footage is on Betacam, VHS, U-Matic and SVHS tapes, which are fragile and impermanent formats. Each viewing shortens a tape’s life and they deteriorate whether viewed or not. Some of the older tapes are in danger of being unplayable, even just once for digitisation.

An example is *The Prisoners*, one of

**● Preserving video is a race against time ●**

**ANN CAMERON, CURATOR OF MOVING IMAGE**



Scottish Ballet presents *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, choreographed by Helen Pickett. © Jane Hobson

Peter Darrell's early works based on music from Bartok's *Four Hungarian Folksongs*, and performed by Scottish Ballet in 1982. One particular tape of this performance required 101 separate captures! It took a whole day to nurse this one tape through the tape player and careful cleaning was required due to tape shedding. Ironically, it is in fairly good visual condition and although there is significant dropout, visually it is not as poor as some other tapes.

### THE TECHNICIAN

Jess Cooling is the Video Preservation Technician for the project. Digitising tape presents many technical challenges that haven't been encountered before, which encourages a creative problem-solving approach.

As Jess explains, "everyone has VHS tapes lying around the house, but what people might not know is that their VHS tapes have a limited lifespan".

Jess has used a number of techniques to facilitate digitisation. "One technique we use to improve digitisation and playback is 'baking' – placing the video tapes in a special oven that heats them to 50°C and removes any moisture that might interfere with playback," she said.

## HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE

- ▶ 60 hours of the work of Scottish Ballet's founder, Peter Darrell.
  - o *Giselle* (1971)
  - o *Nutcracker* (1975) This was revived in 2013 and is now toured every three years
  - o *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1976)
  - o *Such Sweet Thunder* (1987)
  - o *Economy in Straitjacket but Still Room for Movement* (1978)
  - o *Five Ruckert Songs* (1978)
- ▶ *The Waters Edge* (1979)  
Choreographed by Robert North for the Company's 10th anniversary
- ▶ *To the Last Whale* (1982) Peter Royston's experimental ballet, set to songs of the humpback whale
- ▶ *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1993)
- ▶ *Swan Lake* (1995) With costumes by Jasper Conran

Jess has also had to deal with 'sticky-shed syndrome', where the recorded material sheds from the tape's plastic backing as a result of water damage.

It's often slow and painstaking work, but it's necessary so this footage can be kept for the nation.

### THE RESULTS

The project has resulted in more than 200 Scottish Ballet performances being preserved for the nation. It offers a unique record of the development of classical and contemporary ballet in Scotland and the development and history of the national ballet company.

Ann Cameron, Curator of Moving Image, said: "Preserving video is a race against time. This project heralds the start of a continuing relationship with Scottish Ballet where we will receive further works as they are made."

Visitors to the National Library of Scotland at Kelvin Hall can now browse almost 50 years of ballet alongside more than 7,000 other film titles and all the Library's digital collections.

Scottish Ballet is also now raising funds to restore 75 audio tapes of orchestral recordings dating back to 1969, which would sit alongside our digitised ballet performances.



 Come and view the Scottish Ballet footage at the National Library of Scotland at Kelvin Hall from 26 March

# MEET THE MAN WHO HELPED US MAKE A SUPERB EXHIBITION OF OURSELVES

**A**ccepting a job he knew nothing about turned out well for Gordon Yeoman. He retired from the Library in March having played a vital role in changing the way we plan, produce and present our exhibitions.

Our former Exhibitions Conservator explained: "When I left school in 1976, I had plans to become a compositor, the job my grandad did.

"I applied to Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) where there were two posts up for grabs; a compositor and a bookbinder. I had no idea what a bookbinder did, but they offered me that job and I took it. Fortunately, I loved it from the first minute."

In those days, HMSO bound every type of publication, including magazines and books. The organisation carried out work for the Library (eventually Gordon and his colleagues would become direct Library employees). "We had to deal with new bindings and repair old leather-bound

books. It was intricate work, part of which involved the gold tooling and letter



finishing. That became an area I specialised in.

"I believe bookbinding is an art form, especially when it comes to conservation. It's extremely satisfying to take a sorry-looking book, strip it down, repair, resew while keeping most of its original features and turn it back to a recognisable book."

## TURNAROUND

Circumstances changed in 1981 when part of the team relocated from the HMSO premises in Sighthill to the building adjacent to the Library on George IV Bridge. Gordon became part of that relocated section and was based in George IV Bridge until he retired, the team moving to its current location in the Library in 1986.

The change in his career took place in 1996. "I was happily involved in conservation when the person who made stands for Library exhibitions retired and I was asked to take that on," Gordon said. "Soon after, the exhibition side of work at the Library took off and since 1996 that's all I've concentrated on."

Although Gordon's original task was to make stands, it struck him quickly that the Library could improve the way it staged exhibitions. He said: "I'd seen other organisations operate and noticed they were extremely thorough and careful. No one was allowed to handle items except their specially trained staff. This was something we didn't necessarily do.

"We have extremely valuable material that is affected by its environment, temperature, humidity, light levels, and so on. It's essential that all of these elements are carefully controlled if we want to conserve our collections.

"I strongly believed that it should only be those with the right training and skills, that is, those in the conservation department, who should handle the pieces." That soon became



Gordon Yeoman has retired after a whole career spent preserving knowledge for future generations

standard practice, and numerous other developments have taken place since.

"Every step is taken to make sure conditions are right," Gordon said. "Among other things, there are meters in every case to constantly measure the environment. We make bespoke cradles for every exhibit, specially designed for that particular book and the pages it's opened at.

"Above all, we plan every exhibition meticulously and make sure we're prepared for any eventuality; if the heating or air conditioning breaks down in the building, we're ready to respond.

"Teamwork is essential. We work with some incredibly clever people; curators, designers, set builders, lighting experts and our own reprographics and exhibition team who always come up with brilliant ideas."

## DIFFERENT CHALLENGE

Experience has told Gordon that every exhibition provides a different challenge.

"I remember we borrowed the John James Audubon book *Birds of America* from Renfrewshire Council," he said. "It's extremely rare and valuable and,





physically, it's a massive publication. I had to come up with a bespoke stand while the people from Paisley Museum anxiously looked over my shoulder."

He also recalled exhibiting Mary Queen of Scots' last letter, which brought queues to the Library, and *Lifting the Lid* from 2015, which focused on 400 years of Scotland's food and drink. "It was a bright exhibition with brilliant graphics that appealed to people of all ages."

A significant development Gordon regrets he will miss is the opening of the Library's new treasures gallery. He said: "There are some very special items such as the *Gutenberg Bible*, and the Chepman and Myllar prints, the earliest printed books in Scotland, which only go on show occasionally. The new area will provide the chance to show these items more often."

And he has no doubt he will miss the job and his colleagues. "I'm lucky to have made lots of good friends over the years."

Gordon began his 44-year career with a job he knew little about. However, he can retire knowing he's helped the Library gain international recognition for its ability to exhibit – and protect – its culturally priceless artefacts.

## FROM SUNLIGHT TO SNOWBOUND

As Exhibitions Conservator, Gordon's job involved couriering Library material loaned to overseas exhibitions. He remembers several occasions very well:

"One large shipment was in 2014 when I took 92 items to Asia. They related to James Stewart Lockhart, 19th century Registrar General and Colonial Secretary of Hong Kong who had attended George Watson's College in Edinburgh. Many of the items were large and they included beautiful handwritten Chinese posters printed on rice paper.

"With every loan, we receive a report from the location telling us about the conditions. On that occasion, everything had gone well until the day I was due to return. For the most part the weather had been dull, but suddenly the sun came out and light was streaming through the glass ceiling directly on to one of our books. After much to-ing and fro-ing the staff, who were mightily embarrassed, agreed to paint over the ceiling.

"The Library has two books signed by George Washington and I've had to escort them to the United States on two occasions.

"One took place at the Washington family home at Mount Vernon, Virginia. It was an impressive exhibition and I felt very proud during the opening, which focused on links between Scotland and the US, and I shared the stage with the First Minister of Scotland.

"On the other occasion, the exhibition took place at George Washington Museum. I was staying on campus but on the day the books were to be installed I received a call asking me to look outside; five feet of snow had fallen overnight. I was yards from the site but conditions were so bad my hosts had to send a pick-up with plough attached to ferry me there. After which I had to dig out my hire car for my flight home, which was later that same day. Luckily, I made it."

GEORGE ELIOT

George Eliot, by Sir Frederic William  
Burton, chalk, 1865, NPG 669  
© National Portrait Gallery, London



# An echo in the READER'S MIND

Marian Evans's correspondence with her Scottish publisher gives an insight into the complex relationships that created her alter ego, the literary great George Eliot.



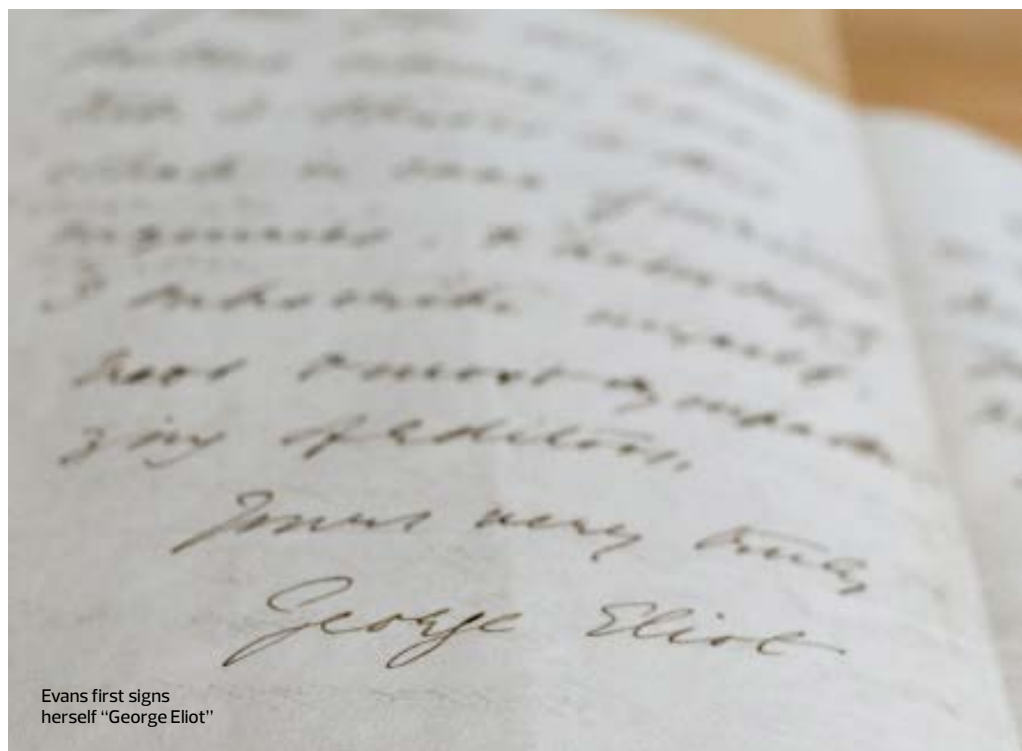
**WORDS:**  
**Kirsty McHugh**  
John Murray Archive and  
Publishers Collections Curator

**T**he author Marian Evans was born in November 1819. But Evans did not become the novelist 'George Eliot' – famous for realistic and sympathetic portraits of provincial life – until 1857.

In a letter to her publisher dated 4 February 1857, which is held in the National Library's archives, Evans first signed herself 'George Eliot'. Amos Barton, the first of a series of short stories which made up *Scenes of Clerical Life*, had been offered to William Blackwood & Sons via Evans's partner George Henry Lewes for use in *Blackwood's Magazine*, a publication to which Lewes was a contributor. Lewes hid the identity of the author, but it became necessary to include a name on the title page of *Scenes* when the collected tales were issued in book form in 1858.

Evans chose a pseudonym in order to have her writing judged fairly. Biographers have suggested a number of factors which contributed to her choice of a male pen name. Most importantly perhaps, Evans did not want critics and readers to be influenced by her (then seen as unacceptable) relationship with the married George Henry Lewes, and to keep her novel writing separate from her career as a critic and essayist. Some commentators have pointed out that despite discrimination in the literary world, by the mid-19th century women were accepted as novelists. However, her experience as an editor at the *Westminster Review* would have made Evans acutely aware of the way in which an author's gender affected the reception and reputation of their work.

*Blackwood's Magazine* was founded in 1817 by Edinburgh publisher William Blackwood and was a respected literary journal for a middle-class family readership. The Blackwood brothers did not know the real identity of the author of *Scenes* until 1858, although they guessed it was Marian Evans. John Blackwood, Evans's editor, entered the family business in 1840 and was involved in setting up the firm's London office in Pall Mall, before returning north to Edinburgh to take over the editorship of the magazine, and later run the publishing house with his brother Major William Blackwood. After Major Blackwood's death in 1861, his son William took his place in the firm and the business – based



at 45 George Street in the New Town – stayed in family hands until 1976.

Correspondence between Evans and her publisher, preserved in the William Blackwood & Sons archive here at the Library, offers unique insights into Evans's writing career and how she negotiated being George Eliot.

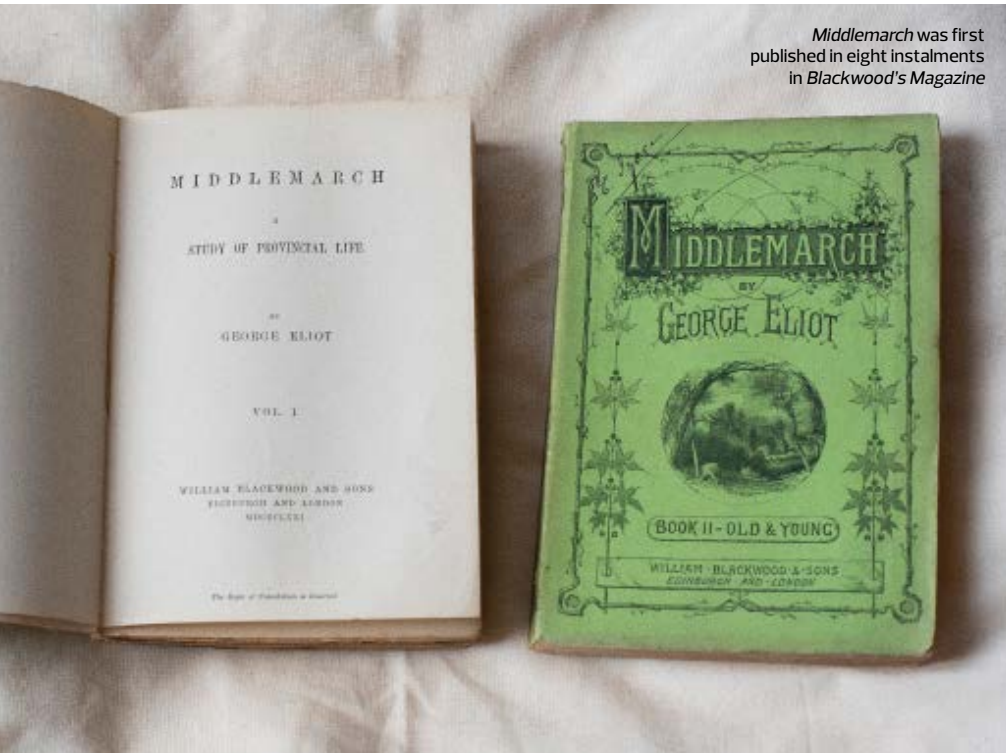
John Blackwood recognised Evans's talent and was tactful and patient with an author who was often depressed and anxious about her work. Blackwood understood the need to bolster his author's confidence but, as their professional relationship progressed,

he came to know that she also appreciated honesty and sincerity. Evans confided her fears to Blackwood over completing *Middlemarch*: "I am thoroughly comforted as to the half of the work which is already written – but there remains the terror about the unwritten."

In his letters, John Blackwood relates his initial reaction to reading instalments of her novels in manuscript, and relays feedback from authors and critics, family members and employees. Evans's circumstances (particularly her socially unacceptable cohabitation with Lewes) made her isolated, and Blackwood went

● It is a most wonderful study of human life and nature. You are like a great giant walking about among us and fixing every one you meet upon your canvas. In all this lifelike gallery that you put before us every trait in every character finds an echo or recollection in the reader's mind that tells him how true it is to Nature ●

JOHN BLACKWOOD ON *MIDDLEMARCH*



Middlemarch was first published in eight instalments in *Blackwood's Magazine*

## RECORDS OF PUBLISHING AND THE BOOK TRADE AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

The importance of Edinburgh as a centre for printing and publishing is reflected in the Library's internationally significant archive and manuscript collections in this field. Papers of Scottish publishing houses (or those founded in London by Scots) including William Blackwood & Sons, W & R Chambers, John Murray, Smith Elder, Oliver & Boyd, and Canongate are rich resources for literary and book history. We also hold papers of stationers, booksellers, and printers such as James Thin, R & R Clark, W & A K Johnston and George Waterston & Sons. We continue to collect actively in these areas.

out of his way to offer support through letters, presents, dinner invitations and other friendly gestures.

Speculation over the identity of George Eliot in the press, however, did lead to tensions between author and publisher. Evans's suspicion that John Blackwood was putting business above her best interests, worries about money and rocky negotiations over *The Mill on the Floss*, contributed to an uneasy relationship in the late 1850s. He was aggrieved too, feeling that Evans was over-inflating the critical and financial success of her works, and being manipulative in threatening to find a new publisher.

In 1862, after publishing four works with Blackwood, Evans accepted an offer of £10,000 (about £500,000 in today's money) from Smith Elder for her Italian historical romance, *Romola*. The work, however, was stressful to write and financially unsuccessful for the publisher, and Evans returned to Blackwood for the publication of *Felix Holt* (1866) and all her subsequent works including her most famous, *Middlemarch* (1871).

Publisher and author knew the reciprocal benefits of working together to grow George Eliot's literary reputation and maximise sales. Evans understood that her realistic fiction was not necessarily suited to all readers' tastes and she might appear inflexible: "incapable of

bending myself to their tastes," as she expressed it to Blackwood. He saw the difficulties of promoting her novels to a mass audience, noting of *Adam Bede* that his only reservation was "really to enjoy it I required to give my mind to it and trembled for that large section of novel readers who have little or no mind to give". Working together, Evans, Lewes and John Blackwood turned George Eliot into a novelist not only admired by critics,

and fellow authors like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, but a popular and widely read author.

When John Blackwood died, Marian Evans wrote to Charles Lewes:

"He has been bound up with what I most cared for in my life for more than twenty years and his good qualities have made many things easy to me that without him would often have been difficult."

Letters in Evans's hand from the Blackwood archive



**“I discovered the WW1  
trench in which my  
grandfather was killed.”**



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