STEAMSHIP ENTREPRENEUR
Mackinnon the ‘Merchant Prince’

OF TERROR AND DELIGHT
Focus on Ian Hamilton Finlay

SWEET OASES
The Edinburgh New Town Gardens

CITY OF LITERATURE
Universe of Ideas
Sir William Mackinnon was one of Victorian Scotland’s greatest entrepreneurs. From modest beginnings as a grocer’s apprentice in Campbeltown and as a clerk in Glasgow, he became, in the words of The Times of 1893, ‘one of the most enterprising merchant princes of our time.’ He established the world’s largest shipping and trading conglomerate. His steam-ship companies, of which the biggest was the British India Steam Navigation Co. (or BI), dominated coastal shipping in South and South-East Asia and in Australia, and they pioneered long-sea liner services between London and various Indian Ocean ports. His family-led business group also invested in jute-milling, coal-mining and above all tea-planting in India. However, since most of his activities took place beyond Scottish shores and were conducted through private partnerships and companies, his contemporaries knew relatively little about his business empire. Only towards the end of his life did he come prominently to public attention – through his involvement in the ‘Scramble’ for colonial territory in East Africa that was set off by the German intervention of 1884–85. His sponsorship of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition and his creation of the short-lived Imperial British East Africa, which acquired and administered the territories now known as Kenya and Uganda, brought him onto the newspaper pages and gave him a reputation as someone who laid the foundations for British colonial rule in the region. Even so, there was an ambiguity about Mackinnon’s goals at that time. Why should a businessman whose operational centre of gravity lay in Asia become so involved with African affairs? Were his motives basically patriotic and philanthropic, or were they essentially commercial and profit-seeking? In fact, William Mackinnon was not marching to the drumbeat of Anglo-German political rivalry in Africa, but to the echoes of an earlier involvement with East Africa that had its origins in the Scotland of the 1870s as well as in his own business ambitions.

Mackinnon saw no dichotomy or incompatibility between commercial and humanitarian objectives. Like Victorian Scotland’s great national hero, David Livingstone, he believed in the liberating effects of the processes that today would be called globalisation – that material improvement and social reform could proceed hand in hand, and that Commerce and Christianity were mutually supportive. His prime motivation stemmed from his success as a shipowner and merchant. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, he became ambitious to replicate along the shores of eastern Africa the same trade and transport innovations he had pioneered around India and through the Indonesian archipelago. He was persuaded by friends – especially by Sir Henry Bartle Frere, the former Governor of Bombay, whose influence had helped him acquire mail contracts in India – that the maritime trade of eastern Africa was ripe for the same transformation by steam technology as was taking place in Asian waters. Beyond that, he saw East Africa as a stepping-stone for the development of shipping lines between India and the British colonies of settlement in South Africa, much as the Dutch East Indies served him as a halfway house between India and the colonies in Australia. Such ambitions, however, ran up hard against the fact that conditions in eastern Africa were very different from those in Asia. Comparatively low levels of sea-borne trade, long distances from major centres of world commerce, and a dearth of natural allies in the shape of expatriate merchant houses in coastal ports made it a far trickier trading environment. Until the coalfields of Natal could be tapped, he would have to meet the high cost of steam coals. There were severe deficiencies in inland transport between the narrow coastal strip and the great internal plateau which comprised most of the interior of Africa, and furthermore, he would have to contend with the political uncertainties of dealing with Zanzibari and Portuguese colonial authorities, which were strong enough to control access to the ports but too weak to do much to develop their hinterlands. All this made for an extremely difficult maritime and mercantile environment in which to operate.

Mackinnon’s principal ally in overcoming such difficulties was the British anti-slave trade movement. He harnessed his steamships and business experience to the belief that so-called
‘legitimate commerce’ would drive out the horrific traffic in human beings that David Livingstone’s travels were bringing to the attention of the English-speaking world. He began to associate with men who were either friends of Livingstone or had collaborated with him in the exploration of East-Central Africa – key among them being his own patron and mentor, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, who had been Livingstone’s host in Bombay prior to his setting out on his last journey. Mackinnon drew on the ideas of such men about how Africa should be opened up to the ideals of ‘Christianity, Commerce and Civilisation.’ A steamship line down Africa’s Indian Ocean littoral would be the first step in a modernisation of African transport infrastructure that would extend to the introduction of steam navigation on the chain of great lakes along the Rift Valley to the north of the Zambesi – as well as overland road or rail links to the lakes. By such means, East-Central Africa would be drawn into the world economy, agricultural and mineral exports would replace the trade in men and women, the local economies would flourish and in the longer term wage labour would replace slave labour.

These ideas were worked out, and the first attempts were made to put them into practice, during the 1870s, when Livingstone was converted from a forgotten explorer into the great iconic figure who inspired a generation of missionary, humanitarian and geographic endeavour. In 1871 and 1872, Frere used the publicity surrounding Stanley’s ‘discovery’ of Livingstone at Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika to mount a political campaign against the sea-borne slave trade between the island entrepôt of Zanzibar and the Arabian peninsula. This resulted in an award to Mackinnon of a mail contract to establish a steamship line between Aden and Zanzibar, and in the Frere Mission to Zanzibar and Oman of 1873, which led to Sayyid Bargash’s agreement to close the slave markets in Zanzibar and prohibit the export of slaves from his territories. Additional mail contracts from the Portuguese and French governments also enabled BI to place a small steamer on a line south of Zanzibar, to the Portuguese settlements along the Mozambique coast and to the Comoros Islands.

The start of the first regular steamship line to East Africa was soon followed by the outpouring of national sentiment over Livingstone’s death, the extraordinary story of the return of his body to the coast, and thence to Britain (carried from Zanzibar to Aden on a BI steamer), the public mourning at his funeral in Westminster Abbey in April 1874, and the publication of his Last Journals later that year.

William Mackinnon, a long-standing supporter of Free Church mission activities in India, was immediately drawn into the scheme to establish a memorial mission at the north end of Lake Nyasa (modern Lake Malawi), as a location from which to spread Christianity and Commerce throughout the interior of East-Central Africa. He became a founding member of the Glasgow Livingstonia Committee, along with a clutch of businessmen that included James Stevenson, a wealthy chemicals manufacturer. Stevenson, who was something of an armchair geographer, harboured ambitions to see the development of a line of water-borne transport from the lower Zambesi, up the Shire River to Lake Nyasa, and from there by overland connections to Lake Tanganyika, in the heart of the East Africa region. His interests therefore converged with William Mackinnon’s, whose shipping line to the Mozambique coast stood to gain from any development of commerce on the lower Zambesi.

However, Mackinnon had wider aspirations than his Glasgow associates. He also wanted to see overland communications with the north end of Lake Nyasa and the south end of Lake Tanganyika being developed from a port on the Swahili coast under the Sultan of Zanzibar’s jurisdiction. This reflected uncertainties over the reliability and costs of a Zambezi-Shire-Nyasa route to the interior, but equally a strong desire on Mackinnon’s part to work with and through the Sultan’s administration so as to stimulate ‘legitimate trade’ between the Swahili coast and the interior. His close ally in pursuing this goal was yet another Scotsman, John Kirk, the British consul at Zanzibar – who had been on Livingstone’s Zambesi mission, who owed his position at Zanzibar to Frere’s influence, and who guided Mackinnon’s and Frere’s views about the need for greater British commercial penetration of the Sultan’s mainland territories. In 1875, Kirk organised an official visit to Britain by Seyyid Bargash, in the course of which William Mackinnon secured the Sultan’s agreement that BI’s agents in Zanzibar – Smith Mackenzie & Co – should also become Bargash’s business agents. (Mackinnon was instrumental in establishing this firm, and two of its three founding partners, Archie Smith and Archie Brown, were former employees of his Glasgow merchant house.) The immediate outcome of the new relationship was an order for an armed steamship, which Mackinnon gave to the Denny yard at Dumbarton. The vessel, named the Glasgow, would be delivered to the Sultan in 1878.

Frere, as President of the Royal Geographical Society, attended the Brussels Geographical Conference of September 1876, as did Mackinnon. Leopold II, who had summoned the gathering, proposed to fund a line of stations along a route between the Swahili coast and Lake Tanganyika, and called for the creation of an international organisation to co-ordinate similar initiatives by national bodies. Frere and Mackinnon believed that Leopold could provide influential support for their own
project, and the king’s call for international cooperation became the vehicle for their attempt to bring together the various strands of Scottish interest in the region. On 9–10 November 1876, they held several meetings in Glasgow with the aim of creating a Scottish branch of a proposed British committee of the International African Association, and giving it the task of funding two roads in East Africa – the first from the north end of Lake Nyasa to the south end of Lake Tanganyika and the second from a port on the Swahili coast to the north end of Lake Nyasa. Such a committee was duly established, comprising the Lord Provost, four MPs and various businessmen associated with the Free Church or the Livingstonia Mission. Under Mackinnon’s guidance it set about constructing the proposed road to Lake Nyasa. The road party (a former Royal Engineers sergeant named Mayes and two young brothers from Edinburgh, Frederick and John Moir) arrived in Zanzibar in June 1877 and, taking instructions from Kirk, began the road from the little-used port of Dar-es-Salaam. Mackinnon hoped to lease Dar-es-Salaam from the Sultan as a base for BI and Smith Mackenzie operations on the East African mainland. His ambitions quickly went beyond that simple proposal. His scheme was to lease the whole of the Sultan’s mainland administration and use its customs revenues to create a development company which would transform transport and communications between the coast and the interior – especially to Lake Tanganyika, on which Mackinnon offered to help Bargash place a steamer. When the idea was put to Bargash through Kirk in April 1877, the Sultan seemed willing to entertain it. Only three years after Livingstone’s funeral, it appeared that his Scottish admirers were on the verge of creating a commercial empire to fulfil his vision for East-Central Africa, and that Scottish enterprise might acquire a pre-eminence in the region comparable to that of Merseyside in West Africa.

It was not to be. Even before the road party set foot in Dar-es-Salaam, the loose-knit project began to unravel. In January 1877, a special sub-committee of the RGS decided that British exploration of Africa should be conducted independently of Leopold’s scheme. Consequently, there would be no British committee of the International African Association. Frere was in no position to reverse this decision because he was shortly thereafter sent to Cape Town to become the British High Commissioner for South Africa. The RGS ‘revolt’ resulted in the dispatch to East Africa of the Johnston expedition (described by James McCarthy in the Autumn 2003 issue of Folio). Although Kirk and Mackinnon were somewhat suspicious of this expedition, they did not regard it as a serious check to their ambitions. At first, indeed, Mackinnon was only marginally discomfited by the turn of events – he seemed to believe that the Scottish ‘sub-committee’ could function as an affiliate of Leopold’s association in its own right, and he was determined to continue to collaborate with the Belgian king. However, he failed to carry his Glasgow associates with him. In looking more closely at the constitution of the International African Association, they concluded that it gave too much influence to Leopold and the ‘Roman Catholic powers’, and wound up the ‘sub-committee’. This decision coincided with the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank in October 1878 – an event that shattered business confidence in the city and undermined William Mackinnon’s
reputation there (because of his previous membership of the bank’s board of directors).

In East Africa, meanwhile, things went no better. In May 1878, Bargash, under pressure from local Arab and Indian interests, made it clear that he would not grant a lease of the whole of his mainland territories. Around the same time, the road party aroused the Sultan’s ire through the drunken antics of its leader, Mayes. The two Moir brothers drifted south to work on the Zambesi-Shire-Nyasa route. Then, in June 1878, the Glasgow arrived in Zanzibar – and so disappointed the Sultan, who had expected something more like a Royal Navy warship, that he withdrew his agency from Smith Mackenzie & Co and gave it to an American firm instead. Finally, in May 1879, Bargash informed Mackinnon that the lease of Dar-es-Salaam, on which by now he was pinning all hopes, would not be possible because it would undermine established trade arrangements. Even Kirk, aware of the Sultan’s growing antipathy towards Mackinnon and his business group, temporarily withdrew his backing from the proposal. Shortly thereafter, Leopold abandoned his interest in the routes from the Swahili coast to Lake Tanganyika and switched his attention to the Congo basin.

The collapse of the Mackinnon-Kirk-Frere vision for the commercial penetration of the Swahili coast and its hinterland left in place the second wing of the Scottish Livingstonian ‘project’ for East Africa: the exploitation of the Zambesi-Shire-Nyasa route to the interior. This went ahead through the efforts of Stevenson and the men of the Livingstonia committee (now minus Mackinnon), and achieved some success through the formation of the African Lakes Company in 1878, to conduct trade along the route, and with the construction of the Stevenson Road between Lake Nyasa and Lake Tanganyika. However, these initiatives continued to be hampered by the very conditions that had attracted Mackinnon to a more direct overland route to the great lakes – the need to tranship goods at the mouth of the Zambesi (which had no known direct access for sea-going vessels), the high levels of Portuguese tariffs on goods entering or leaving via the Zambesi, and seasonal navigation hazards on the Shire River. All imposed additional costs on commerce along the route, and rendered its development a more limited and halting affair than had been envisaged in the first flush of enthusiasm in Glasgow. For his part, William Mackinnon swallowed his disappointment at the turn of events, and continued to work hard to defend and develop his steamship line along the East African coast until, towards the end of his life, concern about German activity in the region enabled him to revisit the ideas he had espoused in the 1870s. In a scheme now focused on Mombasa rather than Dar-es-Salaam, and having at its heart a proposed sea-rail-lake steam transport route from London to Lake Victoria and the Upper Nile, Livingstone’s legacy was projected into Kenya and Uganda.
This year marks the eightieth birthday of Ian Hamilton Finlay. An artist of international stature, Finlay has worked in many different media but is perhaps best known for the creation of Little Sparta, his garden in the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh. A unique synergy of poetry, sculpture and garden design, it is one of Europe’s most important contemporary art works. Some of Finlay’s work was recently on show at the Library in Of Conceits and Collaborators, an exhibition curated by Tom Bee. Here, poet and editor Ken Cockburn reflects on bringing into being a new edition of The Dancers Inherit the Party, a collection of Finlay’s early writing, in an article that incorporates material written by Lilias Fraser.
by Polygon in association with the SPL, with myself as editor and Lilias as researcher.

It was Lilias who dug in the Library. Her initial point of reference was *The Sea-Bed and other stories*, which Finlay had published himself in 1958. Getting hold of a copy of this was not straightforward, and she was unsure if its unavailability was due to its rarity, fragility or the fact that, in the months when we wanted to look at it, it was being recatalogued to incorporate it as part of the IHF collection, and was lurking in various special collection cupboards for processing. Once accessed, however, it was found to include a helpful list of newspapers and periodicals where the stories had previously appeared. In addition, pointers from Alec, provided in conversations face-to-face and electronically, provided some invaluable shortcuts to undiscovered country.

Lilias started with the Accessions Draft Index, picking out files that would definitely or possibly have material covering the dates we were looking at. She used a range of resources: newspaper indexes, online catalogue searches, other online databases available via the Library’s website, the newspaper microfilm viewer-cum-printer, as well as books, journals, manuscripts and letters. (In the course of my own reading, I wanted at one point to refer to the 1996 edition of *The Dancers Inherit the Party*. Much of Finlay’s printed work is produced in finely printed, small editions, and unsurprisingly can only be consulted in the North Reading Room; but I was surprised to find that, presumably on the strength of this output, even this trade paperback was also considered special enough to be delivered and consulted there!) Lilias also used the advice of the librarians, initially to help pick her way through the Draft Accession Index, and subsequently for ideas on how to unearth further material. At that stage she was keeping an eye out for play, story or article manuscripts and individual poems, but more realistically she was seeking biographical information, texts which might shed light on Finlay’s literary and artistic development, and suggestions as to where published but uncollected material might be located.

The fullest letters were those to Derek Stanford and J.F. Hendry. Finlay met Stanford during his National Service. They corresponded from about 1946 to 1956, and then there was a long gap before they made contact again in around 1967. The letters from Finlay to Stanford from the late Sixties are particularly interesting, as he recaps for Stanford his development over the years they have been out of touch. He emphasises continuity rather than change, despite the stylistic changes, and resents being pigeonholed: ‘I find it a wee bit disconcerting when I am typecast as A concrete poet’. Stanford’s *Inside the Forties: Literary Memoirs, 1937–57* (1977) provides lively insights into Finlay’s life and interests during that decade, when he knew MacDiarmid, briefly attended Glasgow School of Art, undertook his National Service and began to write and paint. J.F. Hendry (1912–86) was a writer some thirteen years older than Finlay, associated, like Norman MacCaig, Dylan Thomas, and W.S. Graham (whom Finlay also knew) with the Apocalyptic school of the 1940s which, although now remembered with little affection, provided a springboard for the very disparate aesthetics of these and other poets. Hendry is an undeservedly neglected figure today: although his memoirs and a work on Rilke remain available, his poetry, beyond a selection featured by Andrew Crozier in the anthology *Conductors of Chaos*, edited by Iain Sinclair in 1996, has long been out of print, and has attracted little critical attention. The range of Finlay’s contacts is further extended in a letter to Hendry c.1957, by which time Finlay was living in Edinburgh, undergoing analysis: ‘Muriel Spark came to see me. I liked her a lot. […] She showed me a proof of her new novel, about her nervous breakdown.’

Gleaning information from the early letters was not always a straightforward task. Those which were handwritten tended to be on odd scraps of paper and undated, although occasionally the scraps happen to be torn-up envelopes, which show by their previous postmark the earliest date the letter could have been written. The way in which Finlay used whatever paper he could readily obtain, such as old envelopes or the fly-leaves from books, brings home in an immediate way his poverty at the time, and the fact that he was writing literally in order to live. Use of a typewriter – that engine of concrete poetry – signalled letters written after the dates we were interested in.
The letters and accessions also yielded the ms of ‘Autobahn Aesthetic’, a short essay about Finlay’s experience of post-war Germany, part of which is reprinted in the Introduction to the new edition, and which heralds Finlay’s later conflation of modern warfare and classical themes; and ‘Jimmy’, a very short story about a shepherd. They also contained references to stories accepted by the Glasgow Herald and by magazines, as well as to some plays. The plays, apart from those already published, remained difficult to track down. There are references to productions of, for example, The Displaced Milkmaid, The Family Gathering and Peasants, but most such manuscripts have yet to surface, although Lesley Lendrum, a friend and collaborator from the early Sixties, provided two unpublished playscripts, one of which, ‘The Wild Dogs in Winter’, is included in the new edition. One of the most detailed references to an otherwise as yet unrecovered play comes in a letter of June 1956 to Derek Stanford:

I love [drama] – but not this three-act, one-set business. I like the simple, dramatic, symbolistic form. For instance, my wee, last one-act play has what I [think] a nice plot. Three old, mad women are boarded out in a private house, as is the custom in this country when they are considered to be harmless [...] anyway, these three old ladies, being shut in this one room, are hard put to it to pass the time, so, chiefly, they quarrel. Only, as they have nothing but each her own bed and chair, they can’t even find something to quarrel about. So they quarrel about Christmas – when it is, because they each remember from ‘before’ only one thing about Christmas day. One remembers it has to do with snow, so she often has a Christmas day – once she had fifteen all in a row! Another, who is very fat, remembers it has to do with food, and the third, who is the lowest of the low, remembers only it was a day when everyone made a special effort to be nice. The ‘food’ one has a Christmas whenever the asylum inspector, an old, sour man, comes, as that day the woman of the house serves up a proper meal. [The play begins on a snowy morning, moves to a good lunch for the inspector’s visit, then a new and nice inspector comes and when they insist on wishing him a happy Christmas he is touched and wishes them a happy Christmas back, so completing the conditions for Christmas for all three.] Simple, but for me, real drama, and I regret that the church isn’t to my plays as the C.P. would be if I wrote to the party line.

Lilias also used the Library’s resources to check the online Scottish Theatre Archive, which provided information on three broadcast versions of texts by Finlay: the plays ‘The Estate Hunters’ from 1956, ‘Walking through Seaweed’ from 1961, and the story ‘The Old Man and the Trout’ from 1974.

The surprise for Lilias and myself was the number of short stories she managed to unearth. After she had started to look through issues of the Scottish Angler on Alec Finlay’s advice, and then stumbled across a few more stories by accident, she tried more methodical ways of flushing them out: the Library’s indexes of the Glasgow Herald, as well as of the Scotsman and the TLS, were a useful shortcut to locating entries. Twenty-one story titles were noted from the Glasgow Herald index, exciting finds as each new volume of the index revealed more. The Scottish Angler was worth viewing for all relevant years (1950–54). As an outlet for the stories this title is somewhat unexpected, and it is odd to see them next to advice on fly-tying. The surprise is lessened when one realises that...
the magazine was edited by the poet R. Crombie Saunders (1912–91), who had edited MacDiarmid’s Selected Poems of 1944. All the stories directly concern fish and fishing, which Finlay greatly enjoyed at the time, and it quickly becomes clear that they hold many of the themes that develop through his career. In a letter of c. 1948 to Derek Stanford he writes, ‘I had a fine day at the fishing yesterday (I find angling conducive to clear thoughts).’ By late 1955 he had amassed quite a number of such stories, as he wrote to J.F. Hendry, ‘I write mostly fishing stories, but they are not what you might imagine [...]. I am finishing a book of them. I hope to get it published. The Blue-Suited Fisherman it’s called.’ In fact when Finlay did publish his stories in The Sea-Bed in 1958, only three of the fishing stories were included; of the others, some have rural settings, and some deal more directly with issues of making art, for which fishing had been a metaphor. The fishing theme has remained important to Finlay throughout his career, and many of his best known ‘concrete’ works have fishing as their theme, albeit now sea-fishing, a more collective and commercial activity compared to the individual amateur angler of the earlier short stories. When asked to make a work for the new Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, which opened in 1999, he designed a tapestry featuring the poem ‘Green Waters’, written about 1965, which describes a voyage purely by selecting the names of Scottish fishing-boats.

At some points Lilias was led astray by references to ‘Ian Finlay’, a journalist and critic who specialised in Scottish culture and art. This may have been why Finlay decided to use ‘Hamilton’ in order to distinguish himself professionally and aesthetically. For the Glasgow Herald stories, he opts for ‘Ian H. Finlay’. Having read his namesake’s newly-published Art in Scotland, he wrote in 1948 to Derek Stanford, ‘Northern Romanticism seems to me a highly dangerous generalisation and it leads to all sorts of contradictions [...] I.F. comes near to using my own phrase of “East Coast Classicism”!’ The similarity of their names nonetheless continued to cause confusion down the decades: the index to one of the volumes of the MacDiarmid 2000 series lists ‘Finlay, Ian Hamilton’, but a check of the pages listed yields as many references to the cultural historian as to the writer and artist.

Despite Lilias’s best efforts, it seems likely that there are other previously published but uncalled stories which have eluded our grasp. The Sea-Bed lists in its Acknowledgements the Saltire

or whether they were published remains unclear.

If the stories and the poems in the new edition of Dancers open up aspects of Finlay’s work which have been previously unknown, the poems have been more available to readers in recent times, though there are some new discoveries. Alec mentioned a very early poem published in 1946 in Poetry Quarterly, then edited by Alex Comfort who later made his name with The Joy of Sex. Dedicated to Derek Stanford, it is a rigorously formal sonnet, which we decided to omit as a piece of juvenilia. The uncalled poems come mostly from a 1962 issue of Origin, founded in 1951 at Black Mountain College and edited by Cid Corman, who from 1962 until his recent death lived in Japan. Corman prefaced his generous selection of Finlay’s poems with a letter from the poet, and many of the poems contain short notes from Finlay as to Scottish words or references. Like the Glaswegian demotic of Glasgow Beasts, or the gentle Orcadian of the ‘Orkney Lyrics’ included in The Dancers, it is a spoken rather than synthetic or literary Scots, though here less localised. These poems have been out of print since their first appearance over forty years ago. The other uncollected poem is also a fishing poem, halfway between the individual river-fishing of the stories, and the sea-fishing boats of the concrete poems, first published in Lines Review in 1961, and reprinted in the magazine’s fortieth anniversary edition in 1992. ‘Fishing from the back of Rousay’ has a sea-setting, and the violence of the sea is powerfully evoked, but the poet remains on shore, viewing the drama around him. It is only when he finds a means of casting off and setting sail, when the boats, as in ‘Green Waters’, are actually out on the waves, that Finlay finds his artistic sea-legs.

Note on sources

The Ian Hamilton Finlay special collection consists of about three hundred printed items, examples of his concrete poetry and book art productions from his own presses; all are prefixed IHF. Finlay’s correspondence with Derek Stanford is listed at Acc.6589 and Acc.6533, while his correspondence with J.F. Hendry is Acc.10806. A book called Of Conceits and Collaborations is now in preparation by Tom Bee. In September there will be an exhibition of photographs by Robin Gillanders from The Philosopher’s Garden at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.
Landscape With Trout
Ian Hamilton Finlay

The old pair who let the cottage were not, as I first thought, man and wife: they were brother and sister, and after thirty years in this part of Fife they still retained traces of their native accent – a soft stratum of Lancashire coming through the hard, borrowed, sing-song of the Scots North-East.

She was frail and bird-like, with a pale drained face, and she sat in the kitchen, polished and hung with faded water-colours in crowds, in gilt frame on one of the old lady who had been her summer visitors at dates inscribed nearly in the corners of foregrounds.

He, an old man of over 60, suffered badly from rheumatism; and when he came fishing with me he used the awkward tactics dictated by the rusty hinges of his limbs. He preferred to sit on the bench and talk, his back to the honeysuckle bushes, and his voice rambling on and on. What he talked about is beyond remembering but the method of utterance – its soothing, anaesthetic quality – is vivid still.

The stream was a few hundred yards from the cottage – a few minutes’ walk down the road, blue and sticky in the summer heat. One took one’s rod, ready-assembled from the old shed where the tiles leaked sunlight on to cobwebbed brass. Then, on the way to the water, one passed the large brick house of the old lady who distributed fishing permits – a house which offered a life of seclusion, behind ivy-covered windows, in rooms bulging with massive stained furniture which was reflected in mirrors tarnished by damp.

Red and Yellow

At the grey stone bridge one turned off melting tar and found a way down to the narrow passageway between the edge of the cornfield and the stream’s lush banks. The banks, thick with a growth of some weed like a wild variety of garden rhubarb, made a six-foot strip of unkempt wilderness in a landscape where everything else had been tidied and pruned and trained to produce the maximum edible wealth. A little less than waist-high, this wild-growing weed, varied by wild flowers, made excellent cover for a kneeling angler.

Writing about one’s past encounters with landscapes or with trout is an attempt to reach back through the soft blur of nostalgia to actualities of water and stone. Looking back to that Fife landscape I have a vivid impression of its rich red-and-yellow pastorality, but it is more difficult to dig down to its constituent causes – red-tiled roofs set in yellow cornfields; red poppies too, among the yellow wheat.

The stream also, shared in this fat prodigality; it was a stream and not a burn, because a burn is thin and brown and fast, and this water was crystal-clear and slow-moving. And beyond the imitation rhubarb-weed one could see the red-tiled foof of the hollow mill and the bright yellow horizon dotted with blue-green clumps of trees. No pines here! – the nearest thing to an image of the desert was the monkey-puzzle tree in the expensive clipped garden of someone retired.

The trout were all fat and sleek, and in the shallower reaches there were shoals of silver minnows which fled from one’s shadow into brown crevices in the crumbled bank, or out to mid-stream, silver flickers in the trailing green weed.

A Notable Pool

The only taint of error in this tributary of the Eden was a dull red dye which came down the water daily, and punctually, at four o’clock. I never discovered what factory it was which opened its sluices and discharged this stuff into the crystal water. But their daily dose of industrialism had no apparent effect on the trout beyond that of driving them temporarily off the feed – an hour of fasting, one felt, they could well afford.

The little rich relatives, these trout, of poor starved cousins in far-off mountain torrents: the two types were of the same family but as unlike each other as a New York millionaire and a blubber-eating Eskimo.

Behind the cottage was the cottage-garden: red currant bushes, vegetables, rusted wireless-mast, and the hen-coop, which had its tarred back turned to a field of corn. If one went down through the garden and across the field one could take in a glimpse of the stream, and fish it down to, and under, the bridge. There was a notable pool down there, long, flat, and shallow-seeming, its smooth surface scored by the trailing twigs of a twisted willow tree.

I remember a summer evening by this pool when, in the grey-dark, I watched an unknown angler take two lovely trout from its deceptive depths. Then he wrapped the fish carefully in a clean white handkerchief, and swum up and claimed that place.

Vividly I can recall this brown-stained pool, but I cannot analyse its fascination, or decide why brown water should be more compelling than clear.

I went back to the stream two years ago, only to find that the corner pool had vanished because a tree had fallen obliquely across it, and the branches had choked up with stones and silt. It was a hot summer day, and the drain, too, had ceased to trickle; and the friend who was with me raked the water coldly with a pair of binoculars and complained that, when he tried to cast, the line always cracked behind him like a whip.

Going back up the road we passed the once-rented cottage: but there was no smoke coming from the chimney, and I hesitated and walked by without knocking at the door.
I embarked with the rather naive idea that there must have been some kind of clear notion about the creation of the New Town urban communal garden spaces. Such an assumption of coherent forward planning seems perfectly reasonable when you consider the layout of Edinburgh’s New Town. Its orderly rows of houses offset with green circles, crescents, squares and bordering strips of cultivated open space conspire to suggest that a neat statement of intent must have existed. My first task would be to unearth it. With that, I would proceed firmly on my way. Alas, life was not to be quite so simple: the story that emerged was by no means straightforward, and proved unexpectedly testing to unravel.

The Map Library made an obvious first port of call, to consult maps that would help make sense of the early evolution of the band of land which eventually became East, Central and West Queen Street Gardens. In the eighteenth century much of this area was owned by the Heriot Trust, which let parcels of land to farmers. When the Trust agreed to a joint development plan for housing, they specified that it should be kept as open space. However, communal pleasure grounds were not intended at this stage. Indeed, the very first charter, granted in 1769 to Robert Ord, Lord Chief Baron of the Court of Exchequer, for a portion of ground opposite his house at 8 Queen Street, states quite clearly that it was to be made over solely as an individual garden. No building was to be allowed except what was necessary for a private garden. This condition is repeated in subsequent charters for the remaining pieces of land along this stretch.

Several maps dating from the early part of the nineteenth century trace a gradual division into private garden plots belonging to several different owners. Kirkwood’s 1817 map shows some already neatly laid out, while others remain as rough ground. The next Kirkwood map, dated 1819, indicates further developments, and includes the depiction of washing lines festooned across the middle section, together with the outline of Farmer Wood’s cattle pond.

Whose washing lines were they, I wondered. Although I never could have expected to find that out, I did discover several anecdotes that carried a vivid sense of the lives of some of those who saw the first New Town gardens come into being.

One of the first purchasers of garden ground – at the east end of Queen Street, adjacent to Robert Ord’s plot –
was David Steuart, who was to become Lord Provost of Edinburgh from 1780 to 1782. Steuart spent a lot of money creating an attractive garden. His friend and business partner Robert Allan, who owned a house at the west end of Queen Street, also bought some ground, but apart from adding an enclosing wall, it was left untended. Both of these men have a presence in the National Library of Scotland, and in a subtle way each added a dimension to the unfolding saga of the gardens.

In the days of his prosperity, Steuart was an avid collector of books, some of them rare and of great value. But his fortunes dwindled into bankruptcy and he was forced to put them up for auction, where they failed to make the hoped-for prices, many being ‘bought in’. He sold some of his most precious treasures – including a copy of the Gutenberg Bible – to the Advocates Library, which later became the core of the National Library of Scotland. Much invaluable background information is contained in David Steuart Esquire: An Edinburgh Collector, a scholarly work by Brian Hillyard who now heads the Library’s Rare Books Division.

In contrast to the sombre notes of Steuart’s life, his friend Robert Allan has an altogether more light-hearted presence in the Library: I refer to the Harden papers, which provide a happy and lively account of family life. These papers consist mostly of the journal jottings of Allan’s second daughter, Janet (1776–1837), who was usually called Jessy. Her daily-to-day record of events around the Queen Street house were partly written for her sister Nancy who was in India. After Jessy’s marriage to John Harden, a gifted amateur artist, she sometimes contributed sketches showing the daily happenings. The family was comfortable and sociable, enjoying dinner and supper parties, making music, reading and playing card games; they liked exploring further afield as weather and mood dictated. Robert Allan sometimes added to the jottings and featured in several of John’s illustrations. Jessy makes no comment on the family’s decidedly neglected garden ground. However, this lively, carefree record of the Hardens’ lives drew me close to times long gone and gave me an intimate sense of their domestic life. A delightful introduction to the Harden drawings can be found in Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh: The Harden Drawings, with an essay by Iain Gordon Brown, Principal Curator of Manuscripts at the Library.

A small jump in time takes us to the layout of both the Central and West Queen Street gardens. Wilson is a fascinating figure who deserves to be better remembered. A rare example of a professional artist becoming involved in landscape design, he was for a time Master of the Trustees Academy (established originally to provide instruction in drawing and design for pupils who intended to follow a trade). In the early 1820s Wilson was a key figure in the Scottish art world. He made numerous forays to the continent in the quest to purchase Old Masters on behalf of private clients and for the Royal Institution (eventually to become the Eton Collection).
National Gallery of Scotland). However, a love affair with Italy finally prevailed and he took his family to live there permanently in 1826. He returned to Edinburgh in 1848 to meet up with old friends, including members of the Royal Scottish Academy. His health was failing and he suddenly fell ill and died, not far from the two gardens he had helped to create. This man who had contributed so much, not least in the shape of two important gardens, now lies in an unmarked grave in Warriston Cemetery.

Andrew Wilson entered my life through a scatter of surviving material, not least what I discovered at the National Library, where is a small but very interesting cache of items relating to him. It includes accounts he kept showing his purchases abroad, and business letters, which contain intriguing little asides about his sketching and painting activities as well as sundry details about his family.

My final leap takes me away from Queen Street to focus briefly on another individual who played a small but nevertheless important part in the history of the New Town gardens. William Playfair (1789–1857), best known for his work as an architect, is less well known for his involvement with areas of open space within the New Town. In 1826, he suggested improvements to land to the east of the Mound (the future East Princes Street gardens), while his 1819 masterplan, drawn up on behalf of the Heriot Trust, and covering an extensive area east of Calton Hill and northwards towards Leith, proposes several areas of pleasure gardens. Only a fraction of his vision was realised, but this was highly significant: on land to the east of Calton Hill, he was responsible for creating the generous-sized Regent gardens and also the London Road gardens, which had previously been the site of quarry workings.

We are fortunate to have in the National Library a collection of letters written in the 1830s by Playfair to members of the Rutherfurd family (especially to Major John Rutherfurd and his wife Elizabeth), which offer many personal insights into this most sensitive and conscientious of men. Playfair writes reverentially about his mentor, the Glasgow architect William Stark (1770–1813) and though he playfully refers to architecture as his ‘mistress’, his devotion to his craft did not prevent him from having a wide circle of friends. His congeniality comes through strongly in his letters: for instance, when friends’ children address him informally as ‘Willy’, his words almost glow with pleasure, while with merry indulgence he forgives his fat dog Tuba her excess of appetite, on account of the affection she bestows on him.

Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus notes in her memoirs that, when her family moved to 8 Heriot Row in 1814, there were no ‘prettily laid out gardens’ opposite: ‘only a long strip of unsightly grass, a green, fenced by an untidy wall and abandoned to the use of the washerwomen. It was an ugly prospect, and we were daily indulged with it, the cleanliness of the inhabitants being so excessive that, except on Sundays and “Saturdays e’en”, squares of bleaching linens and lines of drying were ever before our eyes.’ Many years later, while visiting Edinburgh during a ‘broiling’ hot spell in July 1848, she describes the transformation into Queen Street gardens. Taking a gentle stroll, she enjoyed the green oasis as a welcome respite from the bustle of the city. She refers to the gardens most aptly as ‘blessings as well as beauties’ – which I have taken as the title of my forthcoming history, a broad look at the development of the Edinburgh New Town gardens.

While pursuing my research, I always found it a pleasure to enter the Library on George IV Bridge and ascend to the peaceful surroundings of the reading rooms, already musing on what treasures and fresh acquaintances might await me. The human dimension I uncovered there injected life into what might otherwise have been a rather dry process. Although my book is now written, further pieces of the jigsaw may remain undiscovered in the Library’s collections, which means that the fun of the chase is still there for others to experience.

Note on sources

The Library’s digital library at nls.uk has an extensive map section, including several maps which show the development of the New Town. Listed under ‘Edinburgh City’, Robert Kirkwood’s 1817 Plan of the City of Edinburgh and its environs (Newman 598) and his 1819 Plan and elevation of the New Town (EMS.s.61a) are wonderfully detailed. Zoom in, and you can even see individual trees. The drawings and watercolours by John Harden accompanying this article are collected under MSS. 8866-68. Jessy Allan’s journal 1801–1811 (MSS. 8832-63), written for her sister Nancy who was living in India at the time, gives a lively account of daily life in the Queen Street household. Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh, by Iain Gordon Brown, Principal Curator of Manuscripts, includes a selection of the Harden drawings and watercolours. The 1995 edition is in the Library’s collection (GNE.1995.1.3); the 2002 reprint is on sale at the Library shop.
Jennie Renton

With its marvellous collections of books and manuscripts, the National Library is now playing a key role in creating the vision for Edinburgh in its role as the first UNESCO City of Literature. Appropriately enough, the bid was presented in book form, a boxed set in two volumes. Here, Folio’s editor dips into them and hears from literary agent Jenny Brown about some of the possibilities that are opening up for literature in Scotland.

The steering group was joined by leading crime writer Ian Rankin, who ‘started writing novels while an undergraduate student, in an attempt to make sense of the city of Edinburgh’. Martyn Wade, the National Librarian, also came on board. He saw his involvement as complementary to his commitment to the ‘Breaking through the Walls’ strategy, which means extending public access to its treasure-house of the written word.

The Library’s major acquisitions are posted on its website. The latest batch includes the Palis of Honour by Gavin Douglas, London [1553], a rare copy of the earliest known edition of one of his best known works: ‘a mirror for princes, spelling out princely duties and ideals … very much in the European tradition of courtly allegory’. Gavin Douglas was appointed provost of St Giles in 1501. In the prologue to Book VII of his translation of Virgil’s Aenid into Middle Scots, he gives one of the first published descriptions of Edinburgh:

The plane street is, and every hie way Full of flosphis, dubbis, mire and clay.

Also among the acquisitions is a collection of thirty translations of books by Alexander McCall Smith, who recently gave a talk at the Library about his highly successful No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series. He is one of the hundreds of writers who, since Gavin Douglas, have given pen portraits of Edinburgh: his 44 Scotland Street is a day to day account of the comings and goings at a fictitious house in a real Edinburgh street. McCall Smith is one of the best known writers currently resident in the capital. Many others are identified in the presentation to UNESCO, which took the form of two volumes, one bound in green, the other in a pale purple, evoking the colours of Scottish heather. They are a celebration of Scotland’s literary life, past and present.

Interviewed by Folio, Jenny Brown explained that everyone had expected it would take UNESCO months to reach a decision. In fact, the news came straight on the heels of their bid. It was broken to the Scottish delegation at a UNESCO reception in Paris last October – a literally glittering occasion. She described the scene: the lights of the Eiffel Tower sparkled against the night sky as ‘we were taken to one side and told of our success. It was an unforgettable moment. Then we learned that the Scottish media had already been given the news!’ There followed a hectic round of interviews and photo calls.

The mood of euphoria has been maintained with the news that the 2005 Man Booker Prize is to be announced in Edinburgh, and that the John Murray Archive is to come to the National Library. Recently, Sophy Dale was appointed City of Literature Development Manager. Her brief is to ‘build on this honour to deliver clear benefits for the city and for Scotland, to promote our country through literature and to establish the city as an example for all the other cities of literature that follow.’

I was interested to hear from Jenny Brown her early experiences of the...
literary charisma of Edinburgh, which has been her home for most of her life. She told me that she has been an avid reader for as long as she can remember. Her love of books was encouraged by visits to the South Bridge branch of James Thin, where the children’s department was headed by Miss Grainger, one of the great unsung heroines of children’s literacy in Edinburgh – someone who could make readers out of children who were previously uninterested in books. Always ready to suggest titles that were likely to engage their imagination, she was a good listener, genuinely interested in what children had to say about their reading interests. Her gift for nurturing a passion for books was perhaps a factor in inspiring Jenny to share her own enthusiasm with others, on both a personal and a professional level.

Jenny recalled another formative incident: as a final year pupil at John Watson’s, she drifted by chance into a shop after completing her English homework and found a much-photographed essay on Samuel Johnson, written at the age of nine. The author of the essay was a schoolgirl working on the bookshop’s till and was keen to show her colleague the essay. Gary Aitken, manager of the shop for many years, remembers seeing the essay and showing it to Miss Grainger, who kindly gave the final year pupil some valuable advice on the writing of essay titles.

Jenny has remained passionate about the city creatively inspirational:

Edinburgh has been my home since 1994. It was the place that Harry Potter took shape; as has been well-documented, I used to sit in the Old Town’s cafes scribbling as my young daughter slept in her pushchair next to me. And I nervously posted off the manuscript for Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone from a post box in Leith. All the books in the series so far have been created largely in Edinburgh. My base in Scotland has given me many advantages and inspirations as the series has developed, and as I found myself more and more in the public eye. I’m proud to be known as a Scottish writer, albeit by adoption – and as I found myself more and more in the public eye. I’m proud to be known as a Scottish writer, albeit by adoption – although my Scottish ancestors would have been even prouder to have heard me described as such, I think.

The hope that new projects will be stimulated, encouraging residents and visitors alike to ‘experience the city anew through literature’, is based on the fact that Scotland already has so much happening in the literary sphere. In the same month that Edinburgh gained its new title, a statue of the eighteenth century poet Robert Fergusson was unveiled outside Canongate Kirk, just a few steps from the Scottish Poetry Library. Polygon’s new collected edition of the poems of Norman MacCaig, published this spring, incorporates 101 hitherto uncollected works. In his Precipitous City: The Story of Literary Edinburgh, Trevor Royle describes MacCaig as a ‘singular voice … a poet who writes in English with an Edinburgh accent never far away’. He also includes MacCaig’s ‘Drop-out in Edinburgh’, the second verse captures the tension at Edinburgh’s heart which so haunted and inspired Robert Louis Stevenson, even in lush Samoa:

City of everywhere, broken necklace in the sun,
you are caves of guilt, you are pinnacles of jubilation.
Your music is a filigree of drumming.
You flown into the advent of heavenly hosts.
Your iron finger shatters sad sums –
they multiply in scatters, they swarm
on fizzing roofs.
When the sea
breathes gray over you, you become
one lurking-places, one shifting of nowhere –
in it are warpipes and gentled pianos
and the sawing voices of lawyers.
Your buildings
are broken memories, your streets
lost hopes – but you shrug off time, you set your face
against all that is not you.

Practically every author who has lived in Edinburgh or written about the city is represented in the Library’s Collections, which can be explored via its website, nls.uk. The papers of Robert Louis Stevenson, widely regarded as the most quintessentially ‘Edinburgh’ of authors despite his passion for travel, have found their way into libraries around the world since his death in 1894. However, the Library has several important items and groups of letters relating to him among its manuscript collections. On the Stevenson section of the website these are identified as including ‘early works, such as the illustrated History of Moses, composed when he was six years old, and lecture notes from his time as a student at Edinburgh University. Two important groups of letters, to W.E. Henley and Frances Sitwell, chart his development as a writer and his travels around the world. These are complemented by the papers of Graham Balfour, Stevenson’s first biographer, which include a rich collection of photographs of Samoa’. The quote from Norman MacCaig’s ‘Drop-out in Edinburgh’ is reproduced by courtesy of Polygon.
Notes on contributors

CONNIE BYROM, latterly a lecturer in Sociology at Napier University, has spent over thirty years researching open space as it relates to housing. One of her primary interests is the history of the development of communal open spaces in Edinburgh’s New Town. Later this year, Birlinn are set to publish her Blessings as well as Beauties: The Edinburgh New Town Gardens, the first major work on the subject, in which she reveals how these spaces came into being, how they were designed and how they have been used over the years.

KEN COCKBURN, former Assistant Director of the Scottish Poetry Library, is a poet and editor. With Alec Finlay he established and ran pocketbooks, an award-winning series of books of poetry and visual art, and they are now co-directing platform projects, its publishing successor. His first collection of poems, Souvenirs and Homelands, was shortlisted for a Saltire Award in 1998. His poems have appeared in a number of anthologies, including Love for Love and Dream State, and in literary magazines. The sequence, ‘On the fly-leaf of... a bookshelf’, was shortlisted for the Deric Long Poem Award in 2003.

J. FORBES MUNRO is Emeritus Professor of International Economic History at the University of Glasgow, where he has also been Clerk of Senate. He has held visiting lectureships at Queen’s University, Belfast, Edinburgh University, and the University of Cape Town. He specializes in the history of economic relationships between developed and developing countries. His most recent publications are Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and His Business Network, 1823–1893 and (jointly authored) University, City and State: The University of Glasgow since 1870.

JENNIE RENTON is a freelance editor and journalist. In 1987 she founded Scottish Book Collector magazine. Its first interview was with Edinburgh poet Norman MacCaig and since then she has interviewed a string of authors, including J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, Louise Welsh and Yann Martel. She now edits textualities.net, an online literary magazine, and its companion print version, Textualities. She is editor of Folio and reviews for the Sunday Herald.

NLS diary dates

JUNE

As part of Scottish Refugee Week, the Library is holding two events. ‘Fascist Disneyland’, a reading from the letters of imprisoned Nobel Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kui by Iain Banks, Liz Lochhead and Sarah Boyack MSP, is on Tuesday 21 June at 7pm in Causewayside. On Saturday 25 June at 2pm at George IV Bridge, Burmese puppets bring to life tales of an ancient and remarkable culture in ‘The Hour of Blazing Clouds’.

8 JULY – 16 OCTOBER

Scotland’s Secret War. Some of the hidden stories of World War II are revealed in this fascinating exhibition of secret government documents, private papers, maps, photographs and artefacts – including the code-breaking Enigma machine. Open Monday – Saturday 10am to 5pm, Sunday 2pm to 5pm.

A full programme of events runs alongside the exhibition, including lectures on Hamish Henderson’s war poetry, Bletchley Park, children’s literature in World War II, and Hess in Scotland – as well as a reminiscence workshop and a Forties tea dance!

Admission to the exhibition and events is free, though the events are ticketed. More information is available by phoning the Library Events Line on 0131 623 3845 or by e-mailing events@nls.uk

Autumn 2005

MARGERY PALMER McCULLOCH explores the significance of 1925 for Scottish writing, a year that saw the publication of Hugh MacDiarmid’s first Scots poetry collection Sangschaw, Edwin Muir’s First Poems and John Buchan’s anthology The Scottish Muse. Willa Muir’s Women: An Inquiry marked an increasing interest in women’s writing and about women. McCulloch draws on research for her Modernism and Nationalism (2004) – much of it carried out in the National Library of Scotland’s archives.

ANN MATHESON, former Keeper of Printed Books at the National Library of Scotland, examines the creation of Scotland’s national collection and its origins in the Advocates’ Library. The National Library was formally constituted in 1925, and on 26 October 1925, assisted by the munificence of Sir Alexander Grant of Forres, the non-legal collections built up by the Faculty of Advocates as the Advocates’ Library passed to the nation. In the eighty years since, as the Library has faced the significant changes that the 20th century has brought, it has sought to continue to emulate Thomas Carlyle’s ‘judicious assessment of the Advocates’ Library in 1874 that “essentially it belongs to the whole nation”.

BE A FRIEND

The Friends of the National Libraries

is dedicated to helping the libraries and record offices of Britain acquire books, manuscript treasures and archives for the nation, especially those which might otherwise be exported. It has been doing this valuable work since 1931, and has helped the National Library of Scotland on many occasions. Annual membership is £15: contact Dr Iain G. Brown of the Manuscripts Division for information on joining the Friends.

FOLIO

National Library of Scotland
George IV Bridge
EDINBURGH
EH1 1EW
Tel 0131-623 2700
Fax 0131-623 3701
www.nls.uk

If you have any comments regarding Folio, or would like to be added to the mailing list to receive it (or if you would prefer a large print version), please contact Marketing Services on 0131-623 3761

Folio is edited by Jennie Renton

ISSN 1475-1151

Cover image: Seyyid Bargash with his delegation in London, 1875. (Acc.9942/47)

16