

AN ENEMY WITHIN THE SECRET SOCIETY, by James U. Thomson

There is one thing above all that the Speculative Society of Edinburgh shuns – publicity. No-one but the members knows what is going on behind the doors of their meetings.

So it is easy to understand why, when a book giving a detailed impression of one of the meetings of the exclusive debating society was published in 1819, there was great concern.

This was magnified by the tone of the article in the book entitled “Peter’s Letters to His Friends,” which suggested the meetings were boring – and a waste of time.

So great was the concern among the members that, when they eventually found out the true identity of the author, his portrait was turned to face the wall of the club.

The society, which meets at the Old Quad in the University of Edinburgh, was founded in 1764 by six students (including William Creech, who became Lord Provost) and its membership has included such eminent citizens as Lords Jeffery, Cockburn, and Brougham, Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson.

The book was written under the name of Dr William Morris, who, he said, was admitted to membership on payment of three guineas – a fee which he confessed he paid with some reluctance – and after obtaining the necessary two sponsors.

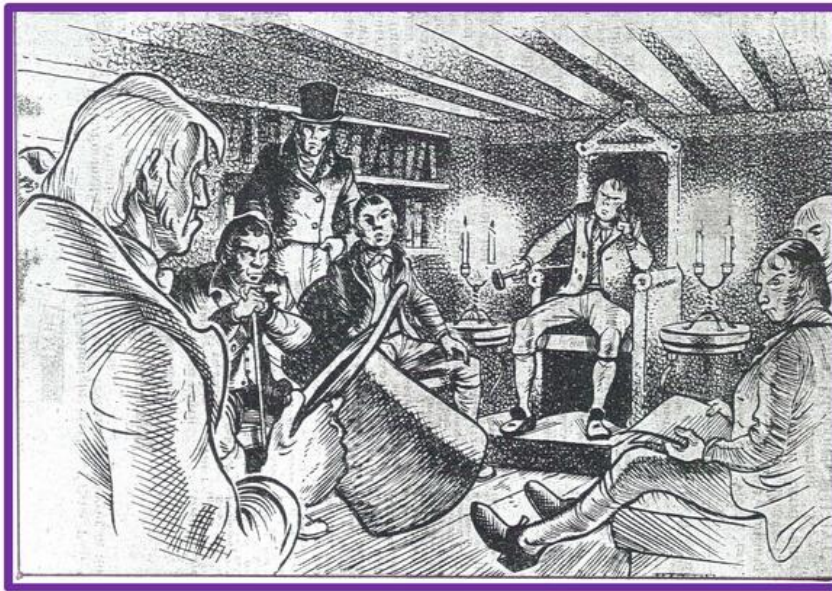
To celebrate the occasion, the author arranged to dine with friends at the Lord Nelson, an establishment close to the university, frequented by members of the medical profession, students, travellers and half-pay officers from the army and navy.

The tavern was kept by Mrs Barclay and for the sum of 2/6d the diners were served a meal of Mulligatawny soup, cods heads and shrimp sauce, superior corned beef, a boiled turkey, haricot pigeon-pie and macaroni.

As 7 o’clock approached, and after enjoying such a full evening, it was little wonder that Morris attempted unsuccessfully to persuade his companions that perhaps the Spec could be postponed to another time but his sponsors thought otherwise.

The Speculative Society is the only institution of the kind whose existence is acknowledged in a formal manner by the university, commented the author. It forms a part of the system and as such, is provided with chambers within the college.

When “Morris” was inducted, the meeting took place “in the hall of the theological professor – a low roofed, dark, mean-looking place surrounded with shelves groaning



under Dutch and Puritanical Divinity; and here it was I had the honour of being introduced to them.”

That evening, the chair was occupied by the president – a pale – snub nosed young gentleman with an air of gravity which any professor might be glad to

equal. His eyes were half shut as if to exclude the dazzle of the tallow candles that blazed close before him. His right hand held a hammer and two fingers of the left supporting “the weight of meditation lodging within his forehead,” wrote Morris poking fun.

The members were generally of the younger generation with a small number of somewhat mature age who were for the most part “incipient” advocates, willing I presume to exercise their lungs here, because they have less opportunity than they would wish elsewhere...”

The formalities of the evening over, a young gentleman took up position on the rostrum to the left of the president and from a prepared speech, addressed the assembled company on the subject “A Few Considerations on the Policy of the Corn Bill.”

“I listened for some minutes to what he said; but soon perceived that the whole of his merits amounted to nothing more than having translated from bad into worse English, a treatise on the same subject in the Edinburgh Review; so I amused myself during the rest of the performance with some hearty sighs for having so easily been induced to distrust my own inclinations, and quit Mrs Barclay (Lord Nelson Inn) for the Speculative.” he wrote.

The speech completed the chairman opened his eyes and asked for comments. Several minutes passed disturbed only by the rustle of the manuscripts as the proud author returned it to his pocket. At last the praise came forth.

“The essay,” said one member, “displayed every quality which could render an essay honourable to its writer and agreeable to the society.” And amid loud cries of “hear, hear,” the critic went on to describe the speech as one of the finest he had ever

heard even at the Speculative Society of Edinburgh. But it did not meet with the approval of all.

"Mr President, it is absolutely impossible that I should refrain from expressing my feeling of pain, horror, contempt, disgust and indignation, that the Speculative Society of Edinburgh should have ever have been subjected to listen to such and essay ..." believed another member.

The content, he said, was meagre in matter, cold in conception, impotent in illustration, false in facts, absurd in argument, and barren in basis ..." Again these remarks were greeted with "Hear, hear."

And so the debate went on back and forth until, Morris assures us, one half of the company was fast asleep, the remainder yawning and fidgeting or shuffling their feet.

Unable to contain himself, Morris grabbed his hat and left.

"The transition from this scene of solemn and stupid drivelling, to the warm fireside of Mrs Barclay, 'her broiled haddocks, her scoloped oysters and her foaming tankards, was one of the most refreshing things I have ever experienced."

It is not surprising the society were annoyed at such comments, but probably what upset them more than anything else was not so much what had been written, but the identity of the author — no other than John Gibson Lockhart, Sir Walter" Scott's son-in-law and biographer and a member of the society.

There is no doubt that Lockhart wrote the book -with a certain amount of bravado. But I was reminded recently by an Edinburgh lady, Dr Islay M. Donaldson, of the story that, having incurred the wrath of the society, Lockhart's portrait was turned face to the wall where it is believed it remains to this day.

I contacted an office-bearer of the society, but he declined to confirm or deny the story.

Could it be that over a century and a half later Lockhart has not been forgiven?

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Footnote

Despite Lockhart's criticism he completed his three sessions and was granted extraordinary privileges on 8 April, 1783. John Gibson Lockhart, was initiated in The Canongate Kilwinning Lodge No 2, on 26 Jan 1826.