

Around the Archives

The Archive of the Society of Writers to the Signet at the Signet Library, Edinburgh

James Hamilton

The year 1792 saw riots and massacres in France, and the arrest of the French king: in Scotland, the crops failed, and before the second fierce winter in succession closed in, an anonymous solicitor in Edinburgh sat down and wrote:

It is the duty of those who are engaged in the study of a liberal profession to carry their own department to the highest degree of improvement. This is a duty which they owe not to themselves alone, but to the Public; and it becomes more indispensable when any branch of science has been committed to one particular class. This will be found to apply in a peculiar manner to our Society.¹

This paragraph formed part of a lengthy preface to the first printed catalogue of the archive of the Society of Writers to the Signet, one which made an impassioned defence and justification of the Society's collecting policy and collections, especially in relation to legal papers, and a serious declaration of purpose which sustains the Society's collections to this day. The Society was and is the oldest and most significant organisation of solicitors, for whom 'writers' is the archaic term, and its name reflects the Society's ancient responsibilities for the care of the royal seal or 'signet'. Since 1815, the Society's headquarters has been the Signet Library in Parliament Square, Edinburgh, home to the Society's magnificent collections of books on legal and other subjects. But it is the Society's archive of papers, manuscripts and materials which forms the focus of this article, as it is the focus too of the 1792 preface.

The origins of the Society are genuinely lost in the mists of time.² The Society's earliest minute book begins in 1594,³ but the Society itself was already in fully-fledged existence before it became part of the College of Justice following the legal reforms of 1532. It is probable that the Society's real origins

¹ WS Society, *Catalogue of the Session Papers* (Edinburgh, 1792).

² For recent research into the WS Society before the Napoleonic Wars, see J. Finlay, *The Community of the College of Justice: Edinburgh and the Court of Session 1687–1808* (Edinburgh, 2012) and J. Finlay, *Legal Practice in Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Leiden, 2015).

³ Sederunt Book of the Society of Writers to the Signet, I (1594).

are medieval, and lie with a group of lawyers in the service of the king. As W. K. Dickson wrote in 1905:

The Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet is an ancient and honourable body of Scots lawyers. Its members are now ordinarily employed as conveyancers, as agents practicing in the Court of Session, as factors on landed estates, and as family men of business. They have, however, a traditional connection with the functions of Government. The King's signet is, and has been – certainly since the fourteenth century, probably much longer – one of the Royal Seals of Scotland. It was in the charge of the King's Secretary, and the earlier Writers to the Signet were the clerks of the Secretary's office. Their primary duty was to conduct the public and private correspondence of the Sovereign. ... In later times the clerks to the Signet signed summonses and other writs pertaining to the supreme court of justice. ... Writers to the Signet hold office under commission from the Keeper of the Signet, who is also Lord Clerk Register of Scotland, and one of the great Officers of State. The Keeper appoints from among the members of the Society a Deputy-Keeper and a body of Commissioners, by whom the Society's affairs are administered. The Society has played no small part in the life of Scotland – political, social, and intellectual.⁴

An archive needs a home. It is no coincidence that there are few papers relating to the Writers to the Signet in the Society's possession that pre-date the Society's acquisition of its first premises in 1696. These took the form of a Royal Mile tenement rented from the architect Robert Mylne in what became Writers' Court. The Society's records of the layout and interiors of their home in Writers' Court are scant, and we know almost nothing of its internal layout other than from conjecture and brief comments in Society memoranda. But there is some indication that it contained a Great Room, some 20 feet in height, whose design may have owed something to both Michelangelo's Laurentian Library and James Smith's library at Newhailes.⁵ This room, probably lined with books would have enjoyed a view to the north similar to that of another lawyer's book room, described by Sir Walter Scott in *Guy Mannering*:

... a well-proportioned room, hung with a portrait or two of Scottish characters of eminence, by Jamieson, the Caledonian Vandyke, and surrounded with books, the best editions of the best authors, and in particular, an admirable collection of classics. 'These,' said Pleydell, 'are my tools of trade. A lawyer without history or literature is a mechanic, a mere working mason; if he possesses some knowledge of these, he may venture to call himself an architect.' But Mannering was chiefly delighted with the view from the windows, which commanded that incomparable prospect of the ground between Edinburgh and the sea; the Firth of Forth, with its islands; the embayment which is terminated by the Law of North Berwick; and

⁴ W. K. Dickson, 'The Signet Library, Edinburgh', *The Book-Lover's Magazine: Books and Book-Plates*, 6, no. 1 (1905), 1–13.

⁵ Personal conversation with Dr Joe Rock, 2015.

the varied shores of Fife to the northward, indenting with a hilly outline the clear blue horizon.⁶

Scott, an apprentice of the Society in his youth, would have visited Writers' Court on many occasions, and it is interesting to contemplate his having revived its lost Great Room through the medium of Pleydell's James' Court apartment.⁷ In any event, by the 1780s it had become too small for the needs of a growing Society, and the flats above and below the tenement were purchased,⁸ along with another tenement in the Grassmarket intended as a home for the Society's hall-keeper.

Although the Signet Library became famous for book collections with strengths in history, science and the literature of travel, it began life as an archive, and the collections that saw its beginning continue to be the priority for collection today. Almost as soon as the Society had moved into Writers' Court, it is likely to have been acquiring Court of Session Papers. Session papers are the printed legal arguments in civil court cases that, from the seventeenth century until the reforms of the nineteenth century, were distributed to the lawyers in a case and used to present it in court. It is this emphasis on the printed argument and on the written word that led James Boswell to say

Ours is a court of *papers*. We are never seriously engaged but when we write. We may be compared to the Highlanders in 1745. Our [oral] pleading is like their firing their musketry, which did little execution. We do not fall heartily to work till we take to our pens, as they do their broadswords.⁹

Possession of Session Papers gave knowledge of legal precedent, and thus power in court. Individual advocates and writers built up personal collections of papers and sought access to others in forming their arguments. The first direct evidence of a substantial collection of papers in the Signet Library comes from a large manuscript catalogue of papers, in the form of a folio leather-bound volume, probably dating from 1763,¹⁰ entries from which can be related directly to specific surviving sets of papers in the Signet's present-day collections.

Session Papers were acquired as they were printed, but efforts also went into purchasing existing collections as they came up for sale in Edinburgh's frequent book and art auctions. One of the most significant and famous of these was the

⁶ Sir Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* (Penguin Classics new edn. ed. Jane Milgate, London, 2003), 211.

⁷ For a discussion of the private libraries of lawyers in Georgian Edinburgh, see K. G. Baston, 'Humanist Books and Lawyers' Libraries in Early Eighteenth-Century Scotland: Charles Areskine of Alva's Library', in (ed.) P. J. du Plessis and J. W. Cairns, *Reassessing Legal Humanism and its Claims: Petere Fontes?* (Edinburgh, 2015), 348–76.

⁸ Signet Papers II.17.

⁹ H. M. Milne (ed.), *Boswell's Edinburgh Journals* (Edinburgh, 2001), 2 February 1776, 238.

¹⁰ WS Society Archive Box C.

Eldin Sale of books and pictures in 1833. Present at the sale were both Macvey Napier WS, the Signet Librarian, and David Laing, still a book dealer then, but who would succeed to the Librarianship six years later as the first non-lawyer to hold a significant post in the organisation. On Saturday, 16 March 1833, just as bidding was under way on one of Lord Eldin's paintings, a Teniers, the floor gave way. As *The Scotsman* commented, 'Such was the suddenness of the catastrophe, that not even a warning was given by the cracking of the upholding joists; and the first intimation the company received of their danger, was their consciousness of having commenced a descent.'¹¹ The accident produced fatalities and many injuries, but despite all of that the sale was completed, and Napier came away with Eldin's collection of Session Papers.

The arrival of John Minto as Librarian in 1905¹² brought a new energy to every aspect of cataloguing, and this included the archive of papers of all kinds. He already had on his staff the man Thomas Graves Law had called 'The Prince of Indexers', Alexander Mill, and in 1906, Mill set to work on the Session Papers. Taking command of an old ledger he'd used for book cataloguing 25 years earlier, he mapped his progress through the collection volume by volume. It was long, arduous work. As he finished indexing each volume, Mill wrote the day's date in his ledger, and added a flourish, a Christian fish, and a cartoon. His cartoon for 4 June 1913 (Plate 1) shows a horse and rider, above an exultant 'Derby'. News of what had happened that day to Emily Davison would not arrive in Edinburgh until the evening (injured in collision with the King's horse during the Derby itself, Davison succumbed to her injuries shortly afterwards). Mill finished the last of the 734 volumes in 1917, and the index by 1919.¹³ In 1930, 300 further unindexed volumes of historical Session Papers were bequeathed by an advocate, the late David Murray LL.D.: Mill's reaction to this fresh abundance is not recorded. Legal papers and law reports remain the core of the Society's collecting focus today.

From its very beginnings, the Society has been deeply involved in charitable efforts, especially in the Edinburgh area, and it is home to records that are among the last traces of some of the poorest and most deprived. The Society's 'Poors Fund' catered for the brotherhood's own poor – its widows and orphans, and those to whom it felt a connection and a duty. The vouchers and receipts of the 'Poors Fund' survive from the late 1670s on,¹⁴ and offer to the scholar not just the names and circumstances of many of Edinburgh's otherwise most wretched and forgotten, but also examples of signatures, naming habits, addresses and other information otherwise easily lost.

¹¹ *The Scotsman*, 20 March 1833, 3.

¹² *Report of the Curators of the Library of the Writers to the Signet*, 1906 (privately published and distributed by the WS Society).

¹³ Mill's indexes have now been digitised and can be viewed online at <https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22WS+Society%22>.

¹⁴ WS Society Archive Box 7.

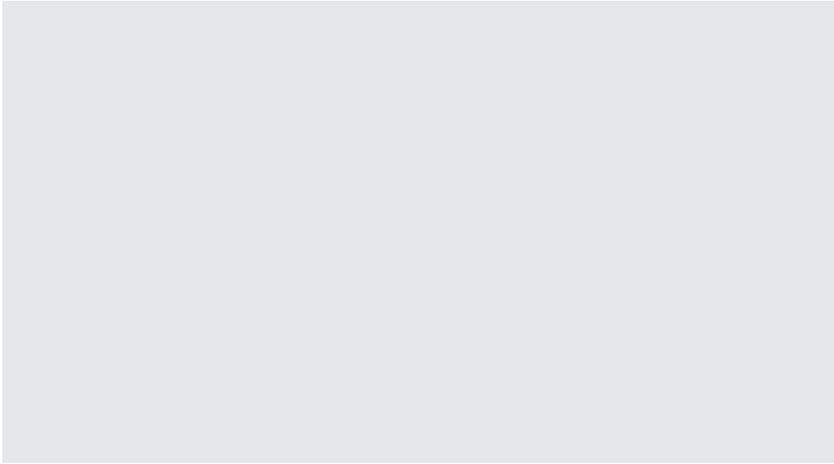


Plate 1 Alexander Mill's Session Papers Index Register, Derby Day, 1913.
© WS Society.

The archive also holds records from many other Society charitable involvements, including the Dick Bequest, which supported the provision of schoolmasters in Aberdeenshire, the Craigcrook mortification, founded by John Strachan of Craigcrook WS, which supported the elderly and orphans, Thomson's Mortification, which purchased oatmeal for the hungry in Edinburgh, the Murray Trust, which trained young women from poor backgrounds to become domestic servants, and Fettes College, set up:

to form an endowment for the maintenance, education and outfit of young people whose parents have either died without leaving sufficient funds for that purpose, or who, from innocent misfortune during their own lives, are unable to give suitable education to their children.¹⁵

In addition to its external involvements, the Society administers its own charity, John Watson's Trust. In 1753, John Watson WS willed his fortune to the support of poor children, which led to the building of John Watson's Institution, a school for poor children and orphans. John Watson's Institution closed in response to government legislation in 1975, and its building in the West End, designed by William Burn, now forms part of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Although many of the records of the institution are now in the care of the Edinburgh City Archives,¹⁶ the recent remapping and rehousing of the Society's archive has revealed substantial holdings remaining

¹⁵ W. G. Blaikie, 'Fettes, Sir William, baronet (1750–1836)', rev. Alexia Lindsay, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁶ Edinburgh City Archives, GB236/GD352.

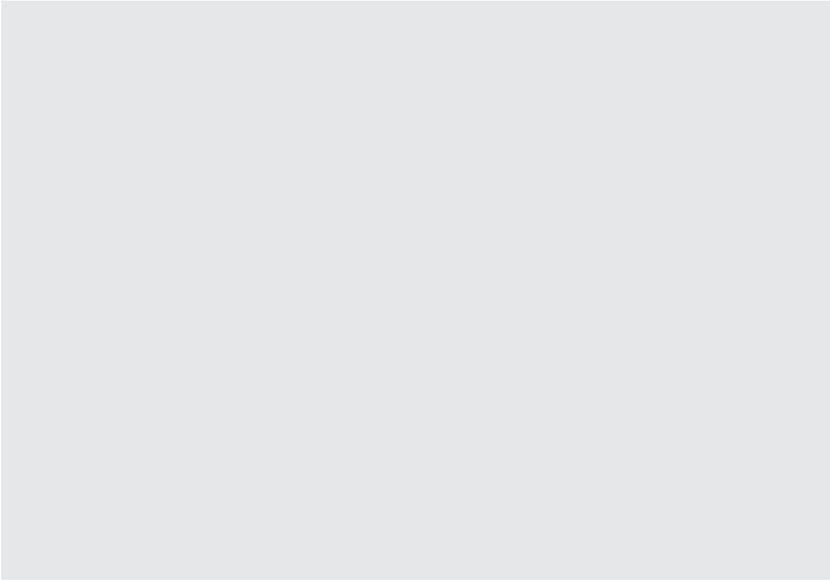


Plate 2 Application to John Watson's Institution for James Jack, 1833. © WS Society.

in our own hands.¹⁷ These include not only the correspondence and minute books covering the founding and early years of the Institution, but also hundreds of applications from the friends and relatives of orphaned children, with full details of who was considered to be part of the social and familial networks surrounding them. These include an application on behalf of the son of Henry Jack, a carver and gilder who had been struck through the head by a piece of wood in the accident at the 1833 Eldin sale. Jack died a few days later from his wounds, and his family sought entrance to the Institution for James not long after (Plate 2).

A rich resource of a different kind exists in the shape of the Society's Widows' Fund archive.¹⁸ This is the Society's own pension scheme, one of the earliest in the world to be created and pre-dating Scottish Widows. It was first mooted in 1780, and after a number of false starts was established by Act of Parliament in 1803. The archive consists of letters and pamphlets from the period of the Fund's formation through to lists of members and widows, with addresses, ages and other information. The Collector of the Widows' Fund has not always been based in the Signet Library building, and this part of the archive has benefited from several recent accessions of material previously held outwith the premises.

¹⁷ WS Society Archive Boxes 4 and 5.

¹⁸ WS Society Archive Box 3.

The history of the Signet Library itself has been told on a number of occasions in the past, most notably by Thomas Graves Law¹⁹ and George Ballantyne.²⁰ Law's account in particular is a triumphant ceremonial march from foundation to present glory, and focuses overwhelmingly on the architecture, the collections of antiquarian books and the scholar-librarians which have undoubtedly graced the Library's history. The twentieth century has a rough way with triumphal Victorian narratives, and the combination of two world wars, economic decline and the emergence of a world that refused to be ruled by grand corporations independent of government brought Sotheby's into the Signet Library as early as 1959²¹ with further sales in 1979.

But what remains is still one of the largest and finest collections of books in private hands in the country, specialising in Scottish history, topography, biography and genealogy, and, of course, jurisprudence. The scholar-librarians who built these collections were figures of national stature. Macvey Napier WS (librarian, 1805–37)²² was a lawyer who would edit both the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *The Edinburgh Review*, and go on to purchase his friend Sir Walter Scott's Edinburgh house during the great author's financial difficulties. David Laing (librarian, 1837–79)²³ was the greatest antiquarian and collector in Scotland's history; Thomas Graves Law (librarian, 1879–1904),²⁴ was a considerable historian who won the post with the help of William Gladstone after Law's loss of his Catholic faith left him homeless and career-less, and became the mainstay and driving force of the new Scottish Historical Society; John Philip Edmond²⁵ was the Stakhanovite genius behind the *Bibliotheca Lindesiana* but cut himself on his collar in his Signet Library office and died shortly afterwards; John Minto (librarian, 1905–35)²⁶ wrote the main work on UK reference books; Dr Charles Malcolm (librarian, 1935–61) was central to both the Old Edinburgh Club and the Stair Society and wrote many books and articles on Edinburgh.²⁷

However, both the triumphant Victorian narrative and its downfall have concealed a greater and older story, of a legal collection and archive that was

¹⁹ T. G. Law, *History of the Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet* (Edinburgh, 1890).

²⁰ G. H. Ballantyne, *The Signet Library, Edinburgh, and its Librarians 1722–1972* (Glasgow, 1979).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 178–81.

²² J. Shattock, 'Napier, Macvey (1776–1847)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

²³ M. C. T. Simpson, 'Laing, David (1793–1878)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

²⁴ P. H. Brown, 'Law, Thomas Graves (1836–1904)', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

²⁵ J. Webb, *John Philip Edmond: Bookbinder, Librarian and Bibliographer of Aberdeen 1850–1906* (Aberdeen, 2011).

²⁶ *The Scotsman*, 9 July 1935, 8.

²⁷ Obituary Notice, *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, XXXI (Edinburgh, 1962), 196–7.

created by lawyers like Napier and then nurtured and sustained, not by scholar-librarians, but by a team of self-taught people from obscure and impoverished backgrounds, the assistant librarians, who, despite all having worked together at some point, would care for the Signet Library for a full century between them. The first of these, the great indexer Alexander Mill, joined the staff under David Laing in 1870; the last, James Christie, would become the only one of the group to become Signet Librarian, retiring in 1968. They would be joined by David Whamond, Andrew Main, and John Robertson. Under the successive driving forces of Thomas Graves Law, John Philip Edmond and John Minto, these people would transform the cataloguing, indexing and storage of the Society's archive, leaving a legacy of care and order from which the Society continues to benefit to this day.

Although the assistant librarians would enjoy only the most basic of primary educations, all were passionate autodidacts, self-taught and hungry for knowledge. Alexander Mill and James Christie became great indexers; John Robertson taught himself Gaelic and became crucial to the growing Gaelic collections at the Library. Where scholar-librarians made their homes outwith Edinburgh – Laing at Portobello, Law at Duddingston, Minto in Corstorphine – the assistant librarians were part of the great new industrial city of Edinburgh that surged west from the Haymarket through Dalry and Gorgie.

They came from that class of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Scots who were leaving for America, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand in such numbers. In 1952, John Robertson died on holiday, and a trunk of his effects that he'd kept at the library remains in the building. In it is his address book: a full third of the Scottish entries it contains are crossed out for villages, towns and cities on the far side of the world. Andrew Main followed his children to Canada after his retirement in 1920, never having quite recovered from discovering the remains of his wife, Primrose, who had burned to death in her armchair at home late one evening in 1896.²⁸

They were not well paid: the assistant librarians received, on average, a salary between a quarter and a fifth of that paid to the Librarian. After David Whamond's death in service in 1920, his son wrote to the Deputy Keeper of the Signet, accusing the Society of abandoning his widowed mother to poverty. Long service was a feature of all of their careers. Alexander Mill joined as a 'young lad' as Laing described him in the Curators' Minutes in 1873, but would not retire until 1935. Main and Whamond served 50 years each, and James Christie 56.

Not all of their contemporaries at the Signet Library were so successful. Robert Hamilton, the bright young hall-keeper who, at the beginning of the 1860s, was clearly relied upon and taking greater responsibilities, took to drink, and fell into debt (his bankruptcy proceedings, announced in the *Edinburgh Gazette*, describe him as a 'dealer in railway shares' – revealing, perhaps, Hamilton's efforts to bootstrap himself out of poverty). He was fired on the

²⁸ *Edinburgh Evening News*, 14 April 1897, 2.

spot. More fortunate, for a brief spell, was the assistant librarian James Shiels, whose drinking scandalised his disciplined new master Thomas Graves Law in 1879: Law was instructed to pay Shiels' salary to his wife rather than to Shiels in an attempt to keep a faithful servant on the straight and narrow, but it wasn't long before Shiels relapsed and was relieved of his duties.²⁹

Of all of these librarians and assistant librarians, only Macvey Napier would see service in the original premises in Writers' Court. Their careers would take shape in the Signet Library proper, the Society's new home, which opened on Parliament Square in the autumn of 1815. The new accommodation included archive space from the very beginning. In the basement corridor, immediately below the Signet Office was a room for Signet Office papers. The Signet Office would move to Register House in 1826, and on the first floor was the Session Papers Room, which would keep that function until the 1990s. The building of the West Wing extension³⁰ in 1900–04 saw the effective completion of the Library in the modern form of reading rooms appended to a system of library stacks. In the late 1990s, modern rolling shelving was installed in most of the archive rooms, and an airtight and fireproof walk-in safe houses the most valuable and unique items in the Society's collections.

One of the advantages to a Society of occupying the same building for 200 years without interruption is that their archive can come to demonstrate a history of archives within itself. The Signet Library contains examples of document storage dating from the seventeenth century right up to the current era.

The oldest document storage possessed by the Society is the 'Timmer Kist' or Box (Plate 3), which dates from the 1670s. It is an iron and wood strongbox, with a complex locking system. It belonged to the Society's Treasurer, and served to hold money, vouchers and receipts. Most of these vouchers still exist and relate to the aforementioned 'Poors Fund', the first institutional charitable involvement in the Society's history.

During the nineteenth century, the bulk of the Society's archive came to be housed in a series of about 40 lockable steel legal deed-boxes (Plate 4). Many of these are painted in a beautiful green enamel paint with the name of the Society in black or red; others are a plain black. Some contain on the inside a pasted label showing all of the products of the box's manufacturer. At the time of manufacture of many of these boxes, they would have been light-tight, airtight, and in the short term, inert; only since about World War II has decay resulted in the arrival of rust and the potential for damp. Although these boxes have now been emptied of their records, they have been retained, both as handsome decorative features for the Library but also as a demonstration of how these things were once done.

During the Edwardian period, the Signet Library acquired hundreds of box files of different sizes and types in a standard red cloth. They were

²⁹ Minutes of the Curators of the Library of the Writers to the Signet, III, 435.

³⁰ Ballantyne, *Signet Library*, 52–3.

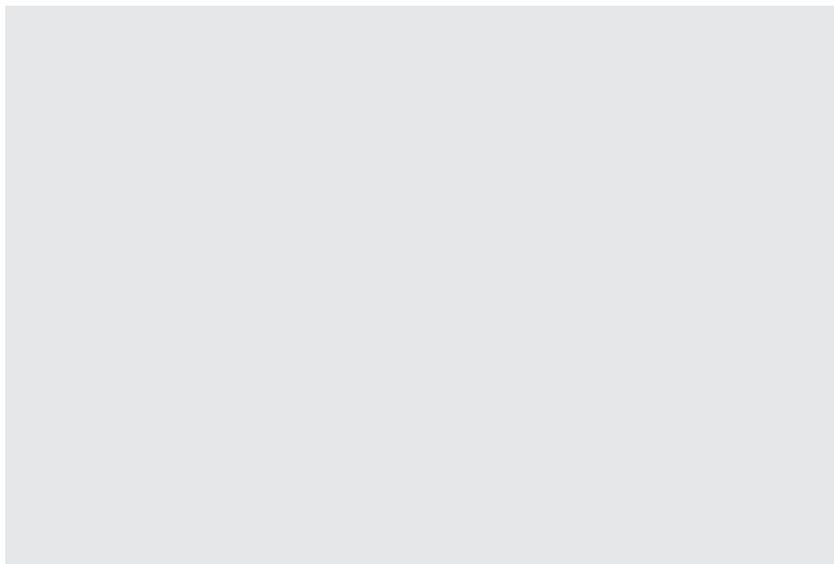


Plate 3 The Timmer Kist 1670s by W. Burn Murdoch, 1890. © WS Society.

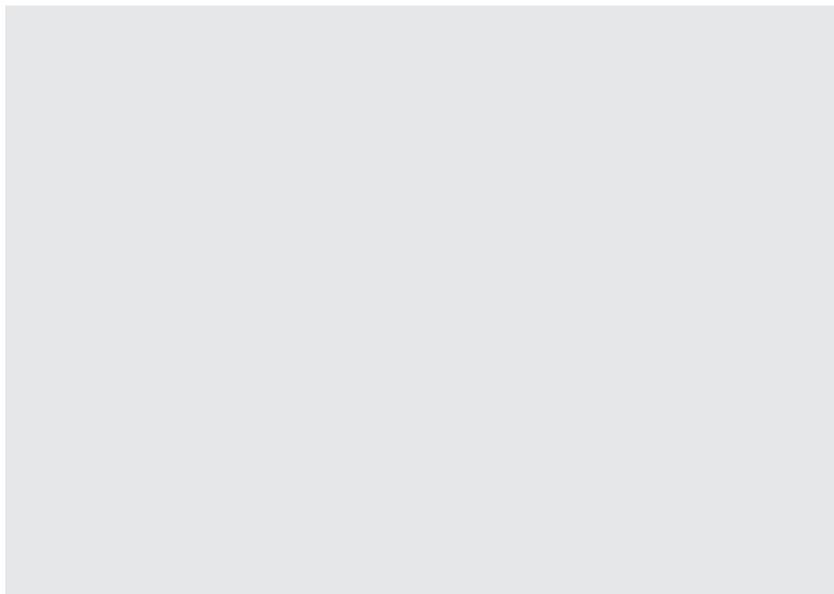


Plate 4 WS Society deed box used until recently for archive storage. © the author.

manufactured by William Arthur Fincham and Sons at the then brand-new Spa Works in Islington,³¹ and the factory where they were made now survives as flats. The label-holders on these boxes are made from Xylonite, which was the first proper plastic to be manufactured in the British Isles. These have provided superb light-fast, dry, dust-free storage for documents, reports, unbound journals and papers and material of all kinds for a century, and remain in use for modern periodicals and government papers.

The practice with archival papers before 1935 was, wherever possible, to have them bound. The Society retains its binding books – records of every binding transaction – from the 1870s on, and earlier activity is reflected in the Treasurer’s records from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. One of the primary records chosen to be bound were the letters of Librarians Edmond and Minto. Both men were assiduous correspondents, and their letters are a priceless record of the relationship between librarians in charge of major collections and writers, historians, other institutions, and the growing support industries that grew up to support libraries and archives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. John Minto was forced into retirement in 1935 after falling from a bus in Glasgow, and his replacement, Dr Charles Malcolm, formerly of Edinburgh’s Library of the Society of Solicitors to the Supreme Court, immediately ceased the binding of letters, although these continue to be preserved. Plate 5 shows examples of a bound archive volume, a Fincham box file, and a 1930s ring binder as employed by Dr Malcolm after 1935.

Similarly bound were the Signet or Jardine Papers. These were originally collected together by Sir Henry Jardine of Harwood (1766–1851) and consist of reports and memoranda relating to both the Society and the Faculty of Advocates during the Georgian and Regency periods. They were indexed, along with the Society’s reports and the Reports of the Curators of the Signet Library, by Assistant Librarian James Christie³² in the years immediately preceding World War II.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the Society’s record of its own membership subsisted in the main Society minutes book, which exists in bound volumes from 1594 on. But from the eighteenth century onwards, and in increasing depth and detail, details of intrants’ training, education and status was recorded separately. The Society’s only record of Sir Walter Scott, son of Writer to the Signet Walter Scott senior, is his application to become his father’s apprentice in 1786. From the nineteenth century until the 1960s, the entire documentation sequence of an apprenticeship was being collated and bound, giving records not only of the intrant, but of the apprentice masters and their firms.

The great enemies of libraries and archives are poverty and neglect. The great Signet Library sales of 1959–64 and 1979 were driven by the permanent loss of traditional sources of income and then by the ravages of inflation. But

³¹ H. G. T. Cannons, *Bibliography of Library Economy* (London, 1910), 380.

³² J. Christie, ‘W.S. Society. Miscellaneous Reports and Papers. Subject-Index’ (typed MS, 1939).

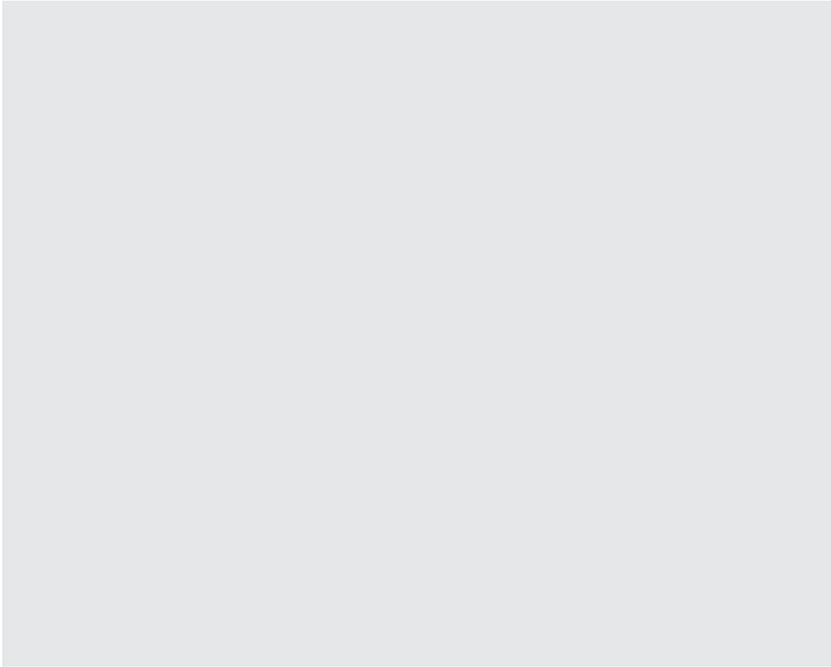


Plate 5 WS Society bound archive volume 1904, Fincham & Sons box file *c.*1910 and ring binder *c.*1935. © the author.

there has been neglect, too, and the villain of the piece in this respect is a surprising one: David Laing. Laing was a great antiquarian, editor, bibliophile and literary figure – almost certainly the greatest of his kind in the Scotland of the nineteenth century. But he was a reluctant librarian, and his extracurricular activities ate deep into his ability to carry out his profession. For many years, he fought a rearguard action against the Society's efforts to demand the exclusive attention of their Librarian, while a proportion of his own collections of books, art and manuscripts accumulated within the building, mixed in with the books and papers belonging to the Society.

Laing's death came suddenly, and he bequeathed an incomplete catalogue and a chaotic situation to his successors. The 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* relates:

He was struck with paralysis in 1878 while in the Signet Library, and it is related that, on recovering consciousness, he looked about and asked if a proof of Wyntoun had been sent from the printers. He died a few days afterwards.³³

³³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edn (Edinburgh, 1911), entry for David Laing.

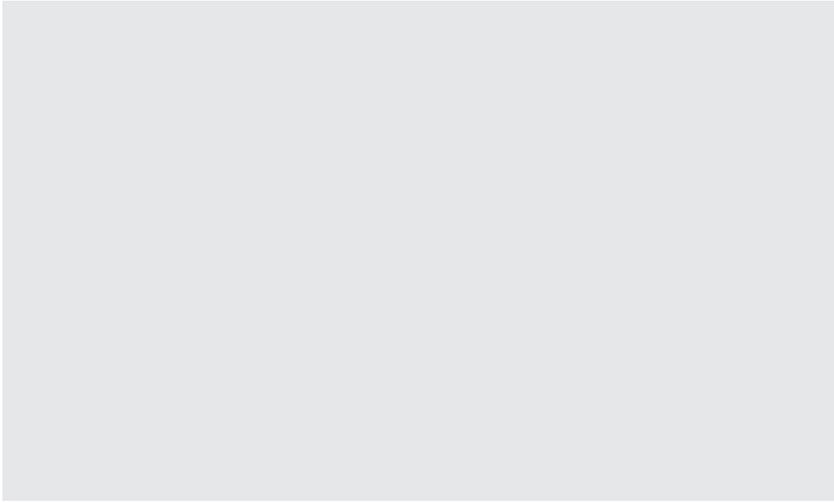


Plate 6 Pages from the diary of George Sandy WS, future Signet Librarian, May 1788.
© WS Society.

Laing's passing would be followed by a half-century of passion and energy, driven by Librarians Law, Edmond and Minto, and it is during this time that the bulk of the most interesting and significant donations arrived. These donations included three volumes of the seventeenth-century correspondence of Robert Boyd of Trochrig, given by the advocate A. Francis Steuart in 1903; the manuscript of Lord Cockburn's *Circuit Journeys*, given by Lord Cockburn's grandchildren in 1930; the manuscript diary of Robert Burns' publisher William Creech, given in 1944 by J. P. Watson WS; and the eighteenth-century diary of an early Signet Librarian, George Sandy (Plate 6), given in 1936 by Mrs Wallace James of Haddington. Not every donation remains in the Society's care: the Blackcastle manuscript (bequeathed in 1933 by the late James F. MacKay CBE WS) now resides with the National Records of Scotland³⁴ and other Society records have also been deposited at Register House.³⁵ A manuscript speech by James Boswell, donated after the World War II in recognition of the Society's role in recovering the writer's papers from Malahide Castle, vanished at some point before 1968 and has yet to be recovered.³⁶

³⁴ National Records of Scotland, GD84/2/246.

³⁵ National Records of Scotland, GD495, with others under GD1.

³⁶ D. Buchanan, *The Treasure of Auchinleck* (London, 1974) tells the full story of the WS Society's role in the recovery of Boswell's papers. I believe (December 2016) that the missing paper is as likely to have joined Professor Pottle in Yale as it is to have been lost in Edinburgh.

Perhaps the greatest donation in the Society's history was made in the middle of the Great War – the manuscript to Walter Scott's novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*. The first part of the beautifully bound manuscript was bequeathed to Alexander Sholto Douglas WS (the trustee of Scott's publisher James Ballantyne) who purchased the remainder in 1900. The manuscript was left to the Society on condition that a glass case was made in which it would be displayed in the Upper Library. The Society also possesses a manuscript copy of Scott's poem *The Eve of St John* (Plate 7), a large number of Scott letters, and account books and other materials relating to Scott's disastrous relationship with the publisher James Ballantyne.

Of similar interest is a collection of several hundred proclamations (royal, governmental and municipal) dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the proclamation of Oliver Cromwell as Protector in 1653, and a collection of broadsides – popular songs, ballads and poems, as printed and distributed on single or double sheets. Many items in both collections are unique, and in recent years Dr Karen Baston of the University of Edinburgh has remapped and recatalogued them and added relevant items to the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC).³⁷ Other worthwhile collections include the Mary Queen of Scots collection from which the first full bibliography of works about the Queen was compiled,³⁸ and which Dr Baston has also recatalogued.

The Society's collection of art, while smaller by far than that of the Faculty of Advocates, is nevertheless an essential part of the inheritance that the Society maintains on behalf of the nation. Most of the great Scottish portrait artists and sculptors are represented,³⁹ including Ramsay, Raeburn, and Watson-Gordon, and the Society's modern commissions have served to keep the Scottish tradition of celebratory portraiture going into our own age.

Sadly, for an archive based in Edinburgh, a city which is second surely only to Paris as photography's ancestral home, the Society possesses relatively little in the way of photographs, with few images even of itself. There is a unique set of images taken by Elmslie William Dallas of the collapse of Ramsay Terrace in 1860,⁴⁰ and a private album of images of President Roosevelt taken in the 1930s by FDR's great Scottish friend, the Hon. Arthur Murray (whose letters were themselves bequeathed to the Society and which are now at the National Library of Scotland). The archive contains a stereoscopic view of the Upper Library after the alterations of 1867–69 by George Washington Wilson (now very faded: Plate 8 shows a contemporary lantern slide taken from the same glass plate), and a framed Washington Wilson view of the same room with its carpeting and furniture restored from later in the same year.

³⁷ The English Short Title Catalogue is online in full at <http://estc.bl.uk>.

³⁸ J. Scott, *A Bibliography of Works Relating to Mary Queen of Scots, 1544–1700* (Edinburgh, 1896).

³⁹ For a recent survey of the WS Society's collection of portraits, see Public Catalogue Foundation, *Oil Paintings in Public Ownership: Edinburgh*, II (London, 2014).

⁴⁰ J. Hamilton, 'Calamity', *Signet Magazine*, 7 (August 2014), 31–5.

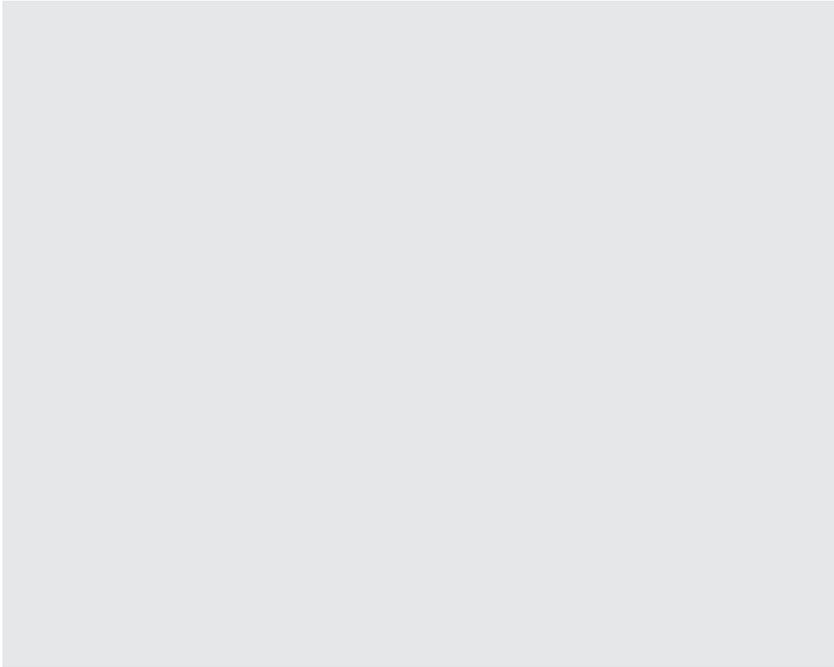


Plate 7 MSS of *The Eve of St John* by Sir Walter Scott c.1799. © WS Society.

Sales and donations have given the Society a large and highly significant collection of legal manuscripts. The earliest of these are property deeds from the first half of the sixteenth century, but the meat of the collection consists of collections of practicks, of acts of sederunt, registers of acts and decreets, notes and minutes taken in the Court of Session, letters, and fragments of diaries, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This collection was magnificently remapped and recatalogued in recent years by Professor Gero Dolezalek of the University of Aberdeen.⁴¹

For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the pamphlet was a central tool for public debate on religion, architecture, public utilities, poverty and controversies of every kind. The Signet Library accessioned vast numbers of these contemporary pamphlets as they were published (often deposited by their authors) and older material obtained at auction or through donation. ‘Rather surprisingly,’ Ballantyne relates, ‘especially during Laing’s time, many of these items were not catalogued and placed on the shelves, but were stored

⁴¹ G. Dolezalek, *Scotland Under Jus Commune: Census of Manuscripts of Legal Literature In Scotland, Mainly Between 1500 and 1660* (Edinburgh, 2010), III, 140–81.

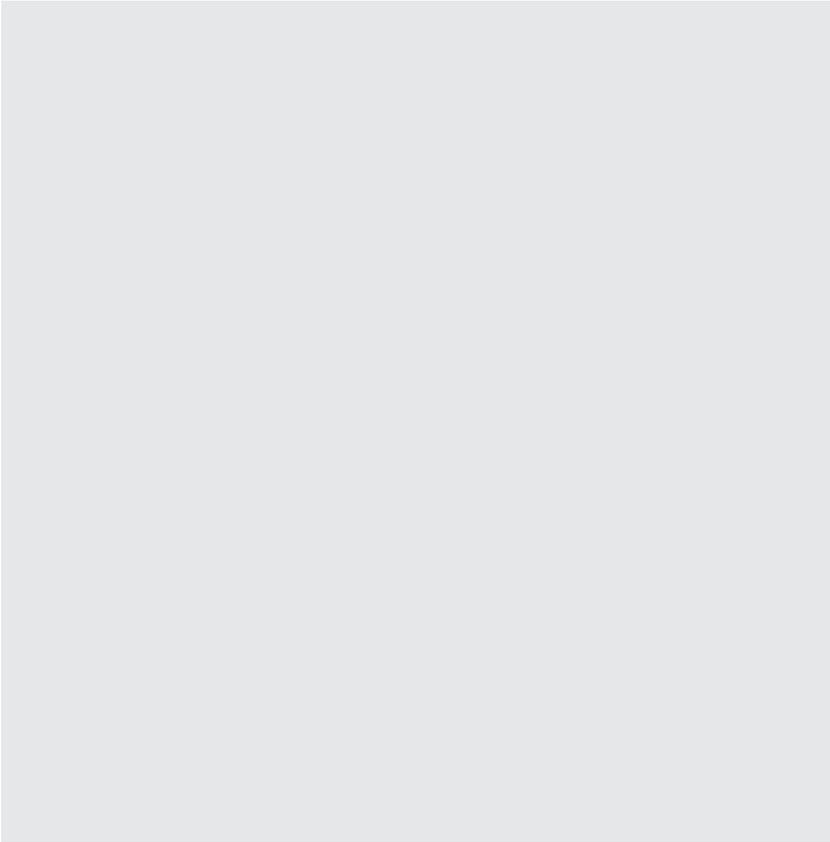


Plate 8 The Upper Hall by George Washington Wilson, lantern slide 1867. Collection of the author.

away in odd corners'.⁴² Thomas Graves Law put them into the hands of Alexander Mill, the 'Prince of Indexers', who took two years to produce a slip catalogue of 18,000 items that would later be typed up and bound into two leather folios. Much of this collection was dispersed during the sales in the early 1960s, but about 3,000 items remain.

One of the greatest treasures of the Society is the library of William Roughead WS (1870–1952).⁴³ Roughead was a journalist and author of books on crime. Alongside his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, he was instrumental

⁴² Ballantyne, *Signet Library*, 175.

⁴³ For all things Roughead, see R. Whittington-Egan, *Roughead's Chronicles of Murder* (London, 1991).

in reversing one of the great injustices in Scottish judicial history, the death sentence passed upon Oscar Slater following the Gilchrist murder of Christmas 1908. Roughead's library, which he bequeathed to the Society after his death, is a rich mixture of true crime writing, press clippings from cases, contemporary pamphlets and broadsides and Roughead's own scrapbooks of clippings and ephemera relating to cases. These include letters written by Madeleine Smith;⁴⁴ the whole collection has been fully resurveyed and recatalogued by Dr Karen Baston with relevant material registered with the online ESTC.

The Society has always enjoyed a close relationship with Scotland and Edinburgh's intellectual societies. Thomas Graves Law was secretary of the Scottish Historical Society, and Dr Charles Malcolm was secretary of the Old Edinburgh Club. The founding meetings of the Stair Society took place in the Upper Library. As a consequence of Malcolm's involvement, the archive holds three of the early minute books of the Old Edinburgh Club, and three of its early cuttings books. These have been digitised and placed online,⁴⁵ and the Club has published a commentary on its birth and early years as a consequence.⁴⁶ We were also able to digitise on behalf of the Club a further early minute book now in the hands of Edinburgh Central Library. The archive also holds a small amount of material relating to the foundation of the Stair Society.

With the removal of the bulk of Edinburgh's law offices to the New Town, and later to the West End and now Fountainbridge, and with the bulk of newly published legal material migrating online, the need for Writers to the Signet to visit their Library in person has dwindled. But the building and its collections continue as a much-loved and cherished feature of the Scottish intellectual and legal scene. In recent years, huge efforts have gone into promoting the collections with scholars, and substantial parts of the pre-1800 collections have been completely recatalogued.⁴⁷ During 2014 and 2015, the Signet Library underwent restoration, and as part of this investment, the Society's own archive has been remapped and rehoused. One of the oldest, continually maintained archives in Scotland is in rude health and is looking forward to the future with confidence.

⁴⁴ R. Davenport-Hines, 'Smith, Madeleine Hamilton (1835/6–1928)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

⁴⁵ The full online archive of the Old Edinburgh Club, including early minute books and scrapbooks, can be viewed at <https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22Old+Edinburgh+Club%22>.

⁴⁶ A. McKinney and R. J. Morris, 'The Formation of the Old Edinburgh Club and its First 300 Members', *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, new series, 11 (2015), 35–52.

⁴⁷ Details of the Society's catalogues can be seen via the Society's website, <http://www.wssociety.co.uk>. A small number of the Society's collections are listed with the National Archives at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/a/A13531246> – the Signet Library is ARCHON code 1487. It is hoped that the remapped archive will be searchable via Archives Hub (<http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk>) in due course.