

David Laing and his Correspondents

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The incoming correspondence of the Edinburgh antiquary, editor and collector David Laing (1793–1878), preserved in Edinburgh University Library, has been used in the past to illuminate both the activities of the said correspondents and also aspects of Laing's own life. However, there remains a great deal in the collection which can cast further light on Laing's character and multifarious activities, some of the information perhaps being unexpected. Particular use is made of the Laing family correspondence, ignored by Gilbert Goudie in his 1913 *Memoir* of Laing.

In 1967, the *University of Edinburgh Journal* published an article by C. P. Finlayson, Keeper of Manuscripts at the University Library, entitled 'David Laing and his Friends'.¹ This was based on the incoming correspondence of Laing (1793–1878), the distinguished Edinburgh antiquary, editor, bookseller, librarian and collector, held by the University. However, the article, apart from drawing on family correspondence, dealt almost exclusively with the correspondence of only eight high-flying individuals: Sir Walter Scott, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, Peter Buchan, Allan Cunningham, Thomas Carlyle, Robert Southey, and William and Dorothy Wordsworth. Even here, the Wordsworth link was mainly with Laing's sister, Euphemia; as Finlayson said, 'The letters between Wordsworth and Laing do not strike a very personal note'.² Most of these names would have been very familiar to readers of Finlayson's article, as they will be to readers of this piece. Peter Buchan (1790–1854, ballad collector and editor) is no doubt the least well known. A ninth individual, William Adcock, was mentioned at the very end of the article. He was a waste paper merchant in Edinburgh who in the line of business passed many items on to Laing. Whether Laing would have counted him as a friend is very debatable; and perhaps Southey too was also more acquaintance than friend. On the other hand, there are a very large number of people featuring in his correspondence whom Laing would certainly have regarded as friends and who are not mentioned by Finlayson at all.

Laing had a very wide range of correspondents: customers, when an antiquarian bookseller and publisher until 1837; fellow researchers, editors and collectors; academics; members of both houses of Parliament; artists and antiquarians; transcribers, facsimilists and illustrators employed by him in his publications; and members of the many historical clubs with which Laing was involved. Not all categories were mutually exclusive. The social range was very

¹ C. P. Finlayson, 'David Laing and his Friends', *University of Edinburgh Journal*, 23 (1967–68), 145–56.

² *Ibid.*, 154.

wide, from dukes with broad acres to people with clearly very few material resources. Gilbert Goudie, in his 1913 *Memoir of Laing*,³ devoted one chapter to listing many correspondents, giving extracts from, or quoting *in extenso*, selected letters.⁴ He reckoned that there are some 7,500 incoming letters, with about 350 draft replies; and, in addition, he stated that there are ‘at least 1,000’ family letters.⁵ These were all bequeathed to Edinburgh University by Laing on his death in 1878, along with his very extensive and impressive collections of manuscripts, and his research and working papers. Also in Edinburgh University Library are Laing’s letters to his great mentor George Chalmers, which were retrieved by Laing after Chalmers’ death, when purchased along with other Chalmers manuscripts. The Laing Collection constitutes a substantial primary source of information on Scottish, and indeed British, cultural activity in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century.

Goudie listed some 250 correspondents alphabetically in various sequences: first, the nobility, followed by law lords and then British commoners, all with some quotations and comments; next come miscellaneous Britons with minimal comment; and lastly, foreign correspondents, again with some quotations and comments. Goudie ended by publishing three letters from David’s father William to Archibald Constable and five letters from David Laing to either David or Archibald Constable, along with two from Laing relating to his successful candidacy for the post of Librarian to the Writers to the Signet in 1837. These last groups are not held in Edinburgh University Library. From all these listings, comments and quotations a reader can get a good impression of the range of correspondents, along with some insights into Laing’s interests, albeit in an arrangement which is not particularly user-friendly. However, Goudie was far from comprehensive in noting correspondents, even celebrated names; for example, there is no mention of W. E. Aytoun, Sir Alexander Boswell, William Chappell (a good series on musicological matters), Francis Child, Thomas Corser, James Dennistoun, Sir William Fettes Douglas, William Dyce, Augustus Wollaston Franks, James Hogg, G. P. R. James, J. G. Lockhart, Henry Mackenzie, Sir Theodore Martin, James Montgomery, William Motherwell (a particularly interesting correspondence about literary editing and research and on collecting), Sir Francis Palgrave, Antonio Panizzi, and Agnes Strickland. Scholars over the years have certainly used the letters from the point of view of studying the correspondent,⁶ or used them to illuminate

³ G. Goudie, *David Laing LL.D.; a Memoir of his Life and Literary Work. With Introduction by Lord Guthrie* (Edinburgh, 1913).

⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter 6, 238–95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁶ For example: William Wordsworth in G. Bullough, ‘The Wordsworth Laing Letters’, *Modern Language Review*, 46 (1951), 1–15; the pioneer art historian James Dennistoun in H. Brigstocke, ‘James Dennistoun – as a Collector and Traveller’, *Connoisseur*, 184 (1973), 90–7, H. Brigstocke, ‘James Dennistoun’s Second European Tour, 1836–1839’, *Connoisseur*, 184 (1973), 240–9 and H. Brigstocke, ‘Memoirs of the Dukes of Urbino.

one or other facet of Laing's work, notably Marinell Ash on Laing's antiquarian and historical activities,⁷ but since Goudie there has been no substantial general biography of Laing.⁸ This article aims to show how investigation of the Laing correspondence in Edinburgh University Library can cast further light on the variety of his preoccupations, interests and habits in order to illuminate what might be termed the human side of a remarkable nineteenth-century Scot.

Goudie stated that he ignored the family correspondence completely in his biography, which is regrettable as family letters can usually illuminate those details of an individual's life that are not to be found elsewhere.⁹ Although the letters from David's three brothers and five sisters who lived to adulthood throw up no sensational facts about him, or each other (for the Laing family papers contain many letters not directly to or from David), they fill out the general social and economic background of the Laing family; and Finlayson in his article did make some use of them to good effect. As a group of letters in isolation in the archive, they in fact show in microcosm many general traits relating to the Scottish middle class at this time: financial worries in an entrepreneurial age with periodic banking and business slumps (brothers William and James); infant mortality (William and sister Mary both lost young children); the need to emigrate to seek a better life or to seek better health (Mary and James); the increasing accessibility of foreign travel for pleasure (three sisters in the early 1840s); spinster sisters housekeeping for an unmarried brother (Euphemia and Agnes); peripatetic life in rented accommodation (Jessie); living off inherited investments, or investing in property for rent (Gilbert); even bachelors searching for a rich woman to marry (Gilbert).

As the main trustee of the estate of his father William, who died in 1832, David Laing had a lot of financial work to do on his siblings' behalf relating to his father's assets. The female members of the family received only income from capital in their lifetimes, and so the trust was not wound up until the death of David's last sister, Euphemia, in 1896, eighteen years after David's own death. A number of his siblings were either dependent for all of their

James Dennistoun: Collector and Traveller', *Connoisseur*, 198 (1978), 316–22; or the French medievalist Francisque Michel in C. I. Wilson, 'Francisque Michel and his Scottish Friends', *Modern Language Review*, 30 (1935), 26–35.

⁷ M. Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1980); M. Ash, "A Fine, Genial, Hearty Band": David Laing, Daniel Wilson and Scottish Archaeology', in (ed.) A. S. Bell, *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition: Essays to Mark the Bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1780–1980* (Edinburgh, 1980), 86–113; M. Ash, 'David Laing', in (ed.) A. Fenton, *The Past and the Present, the Role of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), 39–44. The current writer has used the Laing correspondence to illuminate Laing's collecting activities: M. C. T. Simpson, 'How Did David Laing (1793–1878) Acquire His Collections? An Investigation', *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, 8 (2013), 9–32; M. C. T. Simpson, 'David Laing, Britwell and the "Laing Sale" of 1856', *The Book Collector*, 62 (2013), 599–609.

⁸ The current writer's entry for Laing in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* is regrettably short at 1,800 words: see <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/15/101015886/>.

⁹ Goudie, *David Laing LL.D.*, 238.

lives, or at least at particular periods, on their paternal inheritance in order to maintain their lifestyle and status; and David was often on the receiving end of family letters concerning money. His eldest sister Mary and her husband emigrated to Canada in 1833, and in the early years found life there very difficult and resources inadequate, although later they prospered. In the 1830s David was frequently urged by them to send items and money: for example, on 28 November 1835 Mary's husband, James Sanson, wrote to David, 'Mary earnestly entreats you to state our situation to the other trustees of her late father in order to ascertain whether or not relief can be afforded ere it be too late'.¹⁰ Two years later, on 8 March 1837, James was worried about a bill drawn on David, stating that 'should it come back [i.e. not be honoured], I must give up as I can struggle no longer'.¹¹

David's youngest brother James was also a bookseller in Edinburgh, but not a particularly successful one. Until 1831 he worked at the Laing family bookshop in South Bridge, but then branched out to set up business with a partner, Charles Forbes, at 92 Princes Street. James Thin, the eminent Edinburgh bookseller of a later generation, states pointedly in his reminiscences that in the shop, 'a very elegant one', 'Mr Laing delighted to chat with his customers, being more given to gossiping with them than attending to their wants'.¹² James suffered from ill health, and emigrated to Ceylon in late 1842, where he began by dabbling in journalism through purchasing, and becoming the editor of, the *Ceylon Herald*; he also bought a coffee estate. In 1844 he sold the newspaper at a loss, and had realised that producing coffee was very hard work for uncertain returns. He finally obtained civil service appointments, first as Postmaster of the Kandy district, and then Deputy Postmaster-General for the Central Province. He died of cholera quite suddenly, still in his early forties, in September 1846. His aspirations in Ceylon were somewhat overambitious for his resources and abilities: on 15 December 1842 he was writing to David that 'I must have all the money I can else I go to wreck. Sell my shares in the Glasgow Stock Bank ...', and in the same letter, 'send me every thing you can scrape together', 'send me all the Money possible'.¹³ Things did not improve thereafter: on 30 December 1844 he wrote, underlining the words, 'I must have more money one way or another';¹⁴ and by 10 July 1846, 'the clouds over my debt are thicker than ever'.¹⁵ He died two months later, with his affairs in great disorder, and David had to deal with the executor, long-distance. In the end, James's assets at death barely covered his debts. David had already been

¹⁰ Edinburgh University Library (hereafter EUL), La.IV.9.3, f. 9r. All underlining within quotations in this article appears in the original letters.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 15r.

¹² J. Thin, *Reminiscences of Booksellers and Bookselling in Edinburgh in the Time of William IV ...* (Edinburgh, 1905), 31.

¹³ EUL, La.IV.9.18, ff. 44–5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 79v.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 110v.

involved in the winding up of the Laing and Forbes bookselling partnership the previous year, and was frequently called upon by James to do various things, from ascertaining the price of a copper-plate press to suggesting a minister for the local church. Of all the sibling correspondence in the Laing papers, the material relating to James is the most extensive.¹⁶ In one letter, James makes an interesting observation about the contents of David's own letters: 'I never hear a word of your doings, your feelings and hopes and fears'.¹⁷

David's elder brother, William, a Church of Scotland parish minister at Crieff, also suffered financial troubles at one stage, with which David was asked to help. On 27 April 1841 William wrote to his younger brother:

since you disapprove of selling the shares I shall not do so. But as soon as you can get my fathers [*sic*] affairs arranged so as to set me free from the large debt I owe, you will of course render me a service ... nor will I overdraw my deposit account again if possible certainly not without informing you.¹⁸

Clearly, William had to recognise David as having a better business head than himself, but whether this was done through gritted teeth is not known. William's wife had died in 1835, leaving him with nine children aged between two and eighteen; a tenth had already died.¹⁹ William himself was to die in 1845. David's other brother, Gilbert, also an ordained clergyman in the Church of Scotland, never had a parish of his own, and seemed to live an equable life as a bachelor, living off his investments until his death a year before David. Two of their other sisters, Agnes and Euphemia, likewise did not marry, and from 1845 lived with David in Portobello, east of Edinburgh. Another sister, Jessie, lived in many different places in Britain during her life and, from her letters to her brother, would seem to have had rather a querulous nature. Siblings can often be relied upon not to stand on ceremony: on hearing from Laing in 1864 that he had had his photograph taken in connection with the award of an honorary LL.D. from Edinburgh University, Jessie commented in full Lady Bracknell mode, 'I hope you got in your teeth before having it taken, the want of them gives to my eyes a disagreeable look that is not natural'.²⁰

The way in which the Laing correspondence is arranged at Edinburgh University Library is interesting in itself as an insight to later nineteenth-century social attitudes to fame and rank, but it is not known whether the current order was based on one made by Laing himself or was created after his death. Laing's personal and working papers in Edinburgh University Library are all in a section with the designation 'La.IV'. La.IV.1–4 are four morocco-backed volumes

¹⁶ EUL, La.IV.9.18–22.

¹⁷ EUL, La.IV.9.18, f. 98v, 12 September 1845.

¹⁸ EUL, La.IV.9.13, f. 13r.

¹⁹ H. Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, new ed., IV (Edinburgh, 1923), 266–7. Goudie, *David Laing LL.D.*, 296–7, states that William Laing had three sons and four daughters, but in fact lists three sons and five daughters. He misses out two sons.

²⁰ EUL, La.IV.9.4, f. 67r, 20 April 1864.

containing letters, mounted on to blank leaves, from Scott, the Wordsworths, Southey and Carlyle respectively. The rest of Laing's correspondence is kept loose, in folders within boxes. La.IV.6 contains a selection of letters from correspondents who might be termed 'known figures'. Here, for example, are the Sharpe, Buchan and Cunningham letters used by Finlayson. La.IV.8 contains a few letters relating to Laing's job applications, and La.IV.9 contains the Laing family letters. La.IV.14–15 contain a good deal of correspondence relating to the affairs of the Bannatyne Club, which published many records of Scotland's past over the years, and of which Laing was the first and only Secretary from its inception in 1823 until its demise in the 1860s; while La.IV.16 contains drafts of Laing's outgoing correspondence. La.IV.18 contains letters from peers and foreign correspondents; and a few letters mostly relating to particular subjects (for example, Robert Leighton, the Carstares Monument in Edinburgh, and the Scottish Psalter) have found their way into La.IV.25 and 26. However, the bulk of Laing's incoming correspondence is housed at La.IV.17 in fifteen boxes: the current folio numbering goes up to 10,362. Correspondence from the odd peer (e.g. Lord Lindsay) and foreigner (e.g. the Danes, Andreas Andersen Feldborg and Jens J. A. Worsaae) have also wandered into La.IV.17. Some names here are as eminent as those in La.IV.6: Cosmo Innes, Sir Daniel Wilson, Sir Frederic Madden, Thomas Dibdin, Thomas Thomson, for example. La.IV.17 also contains some letters addressed to David's father William, and some draft replies by David, as well as some relevant printed ephemera.

David Laing lived a very long time, and so the chronological range of correspondents is extensive: the 11th Earl of Buchan and George Chalmers, for instance, were born in 1742, while the 5th Earl of Rosebery did not die until 1929. From some individuals there is a long sequence of letters, spanning the decades. From others there are only one or two, but even with these the individual details can be arresting, for example the following written on 10 January 1865 from 2 West Preston Street, Edinburgh:

Dear Sir

Pray excuse the liberty I take in writing to you – My husband is doing some little work for you just now, and I hope you won't think it strange if I beg of you not to give him any money on any account. He is doing so nicely now, since his illness, improving so much, that I am most anxious to keep temptation out of his way. A little work is an object to us, still I would sooner he did not get it, than that he should fall back from his good resolutions. Poverty is a trifle compared with that other end. And he is so good, he is worth saving. He would be hurt if he thought I had mentioned the matter ...

As a postscript she added 'Perhaps you will be so kind as to send here, when you are paying him ...'.²¹ The writer of this pathetic letter was one Mary Josephine E. Doyle and the item is thus of some literary significance when it is realised

²¹ EUL, La.IV.17, ff. 2735–6.

that the husband in question was the alcoholic artist Charles Altamont Doyle, father of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (b.1859).

Bannatyne Club correspondence is not restricted to La.IV.14–15: the Club's affairs appear throughout letters in La.IV.17–18. Many of Laing's foreign correspondents were librarians acknowledging receipt of Club publications for their institutional collections, while in La.IV.17 various Club matters were aired, from editorial business to problems with the finished books. Laing as Secretary clearly had a very great deal of work producing and distributing the volumes, as well as editing the content of a good number himself. Members sometimes complained about the resulting publications, or asked Laing's advice about their holdings: Alexander Maconochie, the judge Lord Meadowbank, wrote that his copy of volume two of John Lauder of Fountainhall's *Historical Notices*, recently sent to him, 'is very seriously defaced by blots of blood on the great majority of its pages'; he thought that the binder must have met with some kind of accident, and could Laing suggest how the defect (in the sheet not the binder) might be remedied.²² Interestingly enough, George Dundas wrote to Laing on 15 December 1848 that his brother Sir David had informed him that in his copy of the same work one gathering of volume one was 'in a shockingly foxed and dirty state' and could he have a clean sheet to replace it.²³ Sir David Dundas seems to have had particularly bad luck: only six months later, on 10 June 1849, Thomas Maitland, later the judge Lord Dundrennan, wrote to Laing stating that copies of the last Bannatyne Cartulary (that of St Mary of Newbattle) sent to Sir David and the Duke of Sutherland were stained and foxed 'to a most extraordinary extent', and could Laing explain the reason.²⁴ Beriah Botfield, John Spottiswoode, and Alexander Thomson of Banchory were some other Club members who complained over the years about the state of the paper that particular publications had been printed on; while in 1858 Lord Minto mentioned to Laing, via a third party, that his copy of the second part of volume one of Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials* had a gathering missing, with another substituted, and Laing was asked for a replacement. This was some 25 years after the work's appearance.²⁵ Keith Stewart Mackenzie of Brahan Castle, Dingwall, was particularly persistent, having a range of questions over the years for Laing relating to volumes issued by the Bannatyne and other historical clubs: did Laing know of anyone he could sell his copies to, could Laing fill gaps in his set, could a duplicate of one publication be exchanged for another, could Laing dispose of duplicates, could Laing inform him exactly what the Bannatyne Club had been producing, and so on. On the other hand,

²² Ibid., f. 6275r. The date is given as 1 January without year, but most likely to be 1849, as the work was published the previous year.

²³ Ibid., f. 2862r.

²⁴ Ibid., f. 6187v.

²⁵ Botfield: Ibid., ff. 1140–1, 19 November 1851. Spottiswoode: Ibid., f. 8861, 27 March 1861. Thomson: Ibid., f. 9318, 28 May 1852. Minto: Ibid., ff. 2992–3, 18 April 1858 (letter from George S. Elliot).

in some kind of compensation, Stewart Mackenzie did send Laing a ‘fresh killed Salmon’ on one occasion.²⁶

As Laing was a very eminent editor of literary and historical texts, and a researcher on a wide range of topics, mainly relating to Scottish history and culture, many letters are taken up with such matters. And not just academic research. The great French scholar Francisque Michel, in a long series of letters spanning the decades from 1837 which show in general how fond he was of Laing and his family, as well as of Scotland itself, asked the Scot on various occasions to look for, buy and send to him lengths of tartan. The first occasion was in 1840 when the newly married Michel wrote to Laing stating that he had promised this present for his wife. He wanted ‘un plaid en beau tartan écossois [*sic*], dont les couleurs ne soient pas éclatantes au point de ne pouvoir se porter dans les rues sans exciter une attention fatigante pour une femme de son rang’.²⁷ Tartan was also once requested to make a costume for his 3½-year-old son, Roland.²⁸ Indeed, the Laing correspondence preserves a letter from the said son, written in October 1865, when he was in his early teens, in rather fractured English and signing himself ‘Ronald Mac-Donal’.²⁹ He had clearly been asking if Laing could send him Mulready covers and stamps for his collection, and so this little note shows a very benign side to the elderly sage of East Villa, Portobello. Michel’s correspondence also shows how major political events can impinge on scholarly existence. He wrote to Laing from Glasgow on 2 September 1870, the day after the disastrous Battle of Sedan which marked the end of the reign of Napoleon III and led to the siege of the French capital: ‘As to my wife & Son, both remained in Paris, the later [*sic*] to operate in the capacity of a military engineer [*sic*], the former to nurse him in case he was wounded, or to bury him if a Prussian shot him.’³⁰ Happily, both survived.

Being Librarian to the Society of Writers to the Signet from 1837 until the day he died in October 1878, aged 85, Laing was sometimes called upon to give his advice on wider library matters. In March 1849, the library pioneer William Ewart MP asked him his ideas about public library provision in the run-up to his Public Libraries Act of the following year.³¹ Twenty-five years later, in November 1874, James Marwick, Town Clerk of Glasgow, 1873–1903, asked him for advice about building up the city’s public library book collections, following the munificent bequest of Stephen Mitchell.³² Marwick requested further help from Laing in July 1877.³³

²⁶ Ibid., f. 5834r (undated).

²⁷ EUL, La.IV.18, f. 742v; 6 August 1840.

²⁸ Ibid., f. 919v. Undated but probably 1854.

²⁹ Ibid., ff. 869–70. Inserted into a Francisque Michel letter to Laing of 8 October 1865.

³⁰ Ibid., f. 888v.

³¹ EUL, La.IV.17, ff. 3074–5, 27 March 1849. Laing’s rather unhelpful draft reply is ff. 3076–7, 17 April 1849.

³² Ibid., ff. 6227–9 and 6230–1, 12 and 17 November 1874.

³³ Ibid., ff. 6233–4, 18 July 1877.

Laing was consulted on a wide range of matters until the very end of his life: in February 1875, William Chambers, formerly Lord Provost of Edinburgh, asked Laing's advice about the wording and location of plaques he was planning to place on walls in Edinburgh which would commemorate famous inhabitants.³⁴ Two years later, Laing was asked to suggest themes for paintings and statuettes to be installed in the 'Relic Room' within the Scott Monument on Princes Street.³⁵ Eight months before his death he was being asked by John Alexander Harvie-Brown of Dunipace House, Larbert, if he knew of any Scottish historical references to the capercaillie, about which he was planning to write a book.³⁶ Laing kept his physical robustness as well as intellectual vigour into old age. In a draft reply, written on 5 January 1865, to one letter in a series from John Phillips about the Moray Aisle in St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, it is clear that the 71-year-old Laing had been in the vault underneath the aisle with some workmen, 'having squeezed [*sic*] down into the narrow enclosure [?] where the three coffins lie', an episode which he described as 'this not very agreeable operation'.³⁷ In August of the same year the painter Horatio MacCulloch asked Laing, by now 72, if he would like to go for a walk 'and look at the Pentland Hills from the point you like'.³⁸ Laing, although twelve years older than MacCulloch, was to outlive him: the painter died in 1867.

From an early age, Laing had a professional interest in older books and was always acutely aware of how texts had been presented to the public over the centuries. His vast library of antiquarian material both printed and in manuscript, acquired throughout his long life, showed his interest in and knowledge of matters to do with the history of the presentation of texts. Indeed, his first publication, in 1815, was a reprint of the catalogue of the gift of books by William Drummond of Hawthornden to Edinburgh University which had considerable pretensions to looking as near to the 1627 original edition as possible, although it fell down on the fine detail. Much later, in 1854–55, he would produce for the Bannatyne Club a facsimile of that milestone of very early Scottish printing, the Aberdeen Breviary of 1509–10. Unfortunately, the substantial quarto production of the facsimile was in utter contrast with the diminutive physical appearance of the original.

Laing's correspondence also shows his interest in how books were produced. Between 1813 and 1818, Alexander Boswell (later Sir Alexander) of Auchinleck was writing to Laing about types and paper, relating to his private Auchinleck Press. In the early 1840s Laing was asked by Edward Vernon Utterson to send

³⁴ Ibid., ff. 1687–9, 12 February 1875. Laing's draft reply is ff. 1690–1.

³⁵ Ibid., ff. 6922–3, 29 December 1877. The writer was Robert Morham Jr; Laing's draft reply is ff. 6924–5.

³⁶ Ibid., ff. 4443–4, 23 February 1878. The work was published in 1879, but there is no mention of Laing in the acknowledgements.

³⁷ Ibid., f. 7428v.

³⁸ EUL, La.IV.6, Macc. 1.

ornaments, borders, etc., for use at his Beldornie Press at Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The productions Laing himself saw through the press necessitated close involvement not just with printers, but also with transcribers and those involved in illustration. For example, the printing historian Robert Dickson, based in Carnoustie, discussed with Laing in the 1860s and 1870s the reproductive capabilities of lithography and photolithography, sending examples he had produced; while the letterhead of Augustus A. Burt of London described himself in 1866 as ‘Antiquarian Draughtsman. & Fac-Similist. Genealogist. Record Searcher. & Translator’.³⁹

Collecting activities in general take up much of the correspondence. This aspect of Laing’s life has already been covered by the present writer in two previous articles.⁴⁰ His interests covered a wide range, and extended even to stones from demolished Edinburgh buildings which he made into a garden feature at his house in Portobello,⁴¹ but it is probably unlikely that he took up the following offer, made by Robert Balmano in July 1829: ‘would you care anything about the piles of old London Bridge or York Minster. I believe I could get both or either if you or any auld farrant [i.e. quaint or old-fashioned] friend cares about such gear’.⁴² David Laing was very generous about lending items he owned for scholarly purposes, but this was not without risk. On 26 May 1870, Bishop Alexander Forbes of Brechin had to report to Laing that ‘the single folio of *Kalendar*’ that the latter had lent him relating to the research which resulted two years later in his *Kalendars of Scottish Saints* had gone astray; he thought a maid had ‘probably consigned it to the flames’.⁴³ However, it may in fact have been eventually recovered, as evidence from an 1869 Forbes letter suggests it was from a Breviary which is now MS 27 at Edinburgh University Library and still possesses its *Kalendar*.⁴⁴ Another near-run thing happened when Laing lent his highly important Nicholas Hilliard manuscript ‘The Arte of Limning’ to the Royal Librarian Bernard Woodward in 1863.⁴⁵ Woodward died in October 1869 and Laing acted speedily to retrieve it, using George Scharf of the National Portrait Gallery as an intermediary, who in turn involved the Dean of Westminster. Laing had the manuscript safely returned by the end of the year.⁴⁶ A similar scenario occurred following the death of the antiquary John Gough Nichols in 1873: his widow certainly returned unprompted a book owned by Laing, but she had sent a letter Laing had lent to Nichols to someone

³⁹ EUL, La.IV.17, f. 1439r, 23 April 1866.

⁴⁰ See the two articles by Simpson cited in n. 7 above.

⁴¹ See photographs in EUL, La.IV.8.6.

⁴² EUL, La.IV.17, f. 427v, 22 July 1829.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 3214r.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ff. 3212–3, 1 May 1869. The Breviary is in a comparatively recent binding.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 10237–8, 26 October 1863.

⁴⁶ Two letters from Scharf: *ibid.*, ff. 8268–9 and 8270–1, 23 November and 14 December 1869.

else, thinking that he was the owner.⁴⁷ On 16 December 1864, William Lee, son of John Lee, Principal of Edinburgh University, reported to Laing that among items he possessed which had been owned by his late father was ‘a small portfolio of Proclamations connected with the Church’. This was ‘docketed in your handwriting as “purchased at a sale of the late A. Constable”. If this implies that the collection is yours, I shall gladly restore it to you.’⁴⁸ At least once, Laing failed to retrieve an item: a significant manuscript volume of John Donne sermons dating from the 1620s was lent to Augustus Jessopp sometime in the mid-1850s. Jessopp, despite Laing’s attempts, never returned the item.⁴⁹ Eventually, in 1898, the manuscript was given by Jessopp to the Marquess of Lothian, and is now in the National Library of Scotland; and so has finally returned to Edinburgh.⁵⁰

Laing was also free with things he did not own. Rather incredibly, in December 1865 and shortly after he had become Rector’s Assessor, Laing was allowed by the University of Edinburgh’s Librarian, John Small, to borrow Edinburgh University Library’s copy of the very rare second quarto of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1600), so that he could lend it to James Orchard Halliwell in order to make a facsimile. At least Laing arranged to send it by registered post.⁵¹ Similarly, George Dundas in May 1848 reported to Laing that he had discovered, while sorting possessions prior to moving house:

two Mss of Gawin Douglas belonging to the College Library the loan of which was obtained for me through your kindness, now so many years ago. May I ask you to be so good as to return them to the College with my best thanks.⁵²

Some of the incoming letters in the Laing correspondence are easy to read, others are very tricky, and some well-nigh impossible. One of the most legible and beautiful hands is that of Francisque Michel, whose calligraphy almost anticipates the twentieth-century italic revival. Laing’s own writing deteriorated over the years, but although rather untidy, it is not a particularly difficult hand, given familiarity with it. Some correspondents, however, complained: the Shakespearean scholar and forger, John Payne Collier, wrote in 1852, ‘I wish that your hand-writing were, here & there, a little more legible’,⁵³ while the

⁴⁷ Two letters from Lucy Gough Nichols: *ibid.*, ff. 7313–6, 26 October 1874 and 16 March [1875].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 5513r.

⁴⁹ G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson in their edition of *The Sermons of John Donne* (Berkeley, 1953), I, 38, state that Laing gave the manuscript to Jessopp in 1855, but from two letters written by T. R. O’Flaherty to Laing in August and September 1865 (EUL, La.IV.17, ff. 7326–7 and 7328–9, 11 August and 21 September 1865) it is clear that Laing still regarded the manuscript as belonging to him.

⁵⁰ National Library of Scotland, MSS 5767–8.

⁵¹ Laing’s draft letter is at EUL, La.IV.17, f. 4232, 13 December 1865. The letter as sent is also now in EUL, Halliwell-Phillipps Collection, L.O.A. 101 (no. 16).

⁵² EUL, La.IV.17, f. 2860r, 18 May 1848.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, f. 1896r, 30 January 1852.

elderly historian Mark Napier in 1877 said of his own hand, ‘this writing is almost as bad as your own’. Napier was suffering from neuralgia at the time, and the letter included his adaptation of an old chant: ‘From battle, murder and sudden Shingles Good Lord deliver us ...’.⁵⁴ How Laing was addressed by his correspondents also varied, according to the familiarity of the writer. Often there is a progression from the formal ‘My dear Sir’ to ‘Dear Laing’ and beyond, but on occasion formality ceased only to return later: to James Hogg in March 1820, Laing was ‘My dear Davie’, but by 1822 he was back to being ‘My dear Sir’.⁵⁵ Sir Walter Scott had ‘Dear Mr Laing’, ‘Dear Mr David’, ‘My Dear David’, ‘Dear David’, and ‘Dear Sir’ in that order between 1820 and 1823, to be joined after the foundation of the Bannatyne Club by ‘Dear and learned Mr Secretary’, and ‘My dear Mr Secretary’.⁵⁶ Thomas Frognall Dibdin, the exuberant chronicler of early nineteenth-century bibliomania, was, however, unique in addressing Laing as ‘Dearly Beloved’ in April 1837.⁵⁷ In September of the same year Laing had become to him ‘My dear Brother-Bookist’, the next month he was ‘Illustrissimi etiamque Charissimi’, and in April of the next year ‘My dear Sir David – not Brewster but – Laing’.⁵⁸ Laing’s great friend and fellow collector James T. Gibson Craig also jocularly wrote to him several times as ‘Dear Sir David’.⁵⁹

Peter Cunningham, son of Allan, and like his father an author and editor, wrote to Laing on 15 December 1825 (the first letter from him preserved in the Laing correspondence):

‘Your letters are as welcome to me as if they had come from my mistress, who is one of the fairest and worthiest living’ writes Mike Drayton to Will Drummond – and in saying this, the fine old author of *Polyolbion* expressed very beautifully what I feel when I receive a letter from you.⁶⁰

It cannot be known if everyone was as pleased as Cunningham to receive a letter from Laing, but the extent and diversity of his correspondents, along with the variety of the content, show that Laing was, for many decades, in the midst of a wide network of individuals, many of whom were important figures, all pursuing their multifarious aims and interests, drawing Laing into their activities, and taking him into their confidence.

⁵⁴ Ibid., ff. 7252–3, 5 January 1877.

⁵⁵ EUL, La.IV.6, Hog. 1, 3.

⁵⁶ EUL, La.IV.1.

⁵⁷ EUL, La.IV.17, f. 2493r; 24 April 1837.

⁵⁸ Ibid., ff. 2498r (29 April 1837), 2501r (28 October 1837), and 2504r (17 April 1838). These letters are interspersed with ones with less outlandish modes of address. On 4 December 1839, Laing was ‘Charissimi Ruddimani’ (ibid., f. 2511r).

⁵⁹ This is noted by Goudie, *David Laing LL.D.*, 266.

⁶⁰ EUL, La.IV.17, f. 2235r.