

THE ANTIQUITIES OF EDINBURGH

IT is impossible within the limits of a short article, to describe even in the most cursory way, the charm of the antiquities of the Northern Capital. The books that have been written on this subject,—technical and popular—run into many hundreds, and would furnish a small library. All that can be done is to supply some notes which may provide the reader with the "atmosphere" that will enable him best to appreciate the city.

Any city whose history stretches back through more than fifteen centuries, requires a good deal of explanation. With Edinburgh the case is complicated by its having been the capital of a small and very poor country, which for many centuries was constantly at war with its wealthier, more powerful, and more populous neighbour, England. That fact has written itself deeply into the history of Edinburgh, and is expressed nowhere more strikingly than in its domestic architecture. Scotland might have had many models after which to fashion her capital, had she chosen to take her models from the gracious, urbane, and beautiful domestic architecture of England. But a Scotsman's best reason for doing anything in a particular way, has always been that someone else wanted him to do it some other way. So Scotland would learn nothing of England, and consequently in old Edinburgh you have a city whose inspiration is Franco-Flemish. That is your first clue to understanding the place.

Now, in the notes which follow, the writer supposes that a stranger from England, preferably from London, accustomed to the comfortable, spacious, and opulent architecture of that city, is paying his first visit to Edinburgh, somewhere about 1771—the date of Sir Walter Scott's birth—at which time the city was still "old Edinburgh."

The Middle Ages died very hard in Edinburgh. In 1771 it was pretty much what it had been in 1671 or for that matter, in 1471. It was still in effect, a city of one street; the "Royal Mile" which stretches from the Castle to Holyrood, with its numerous "Closes" running down from the main thoroughfare on either side.

Such a street! The busiest, dirtiest, noisiest, narrowest, most crowded, most picturesque, and most interesting street in Europe. For into its narrow compass—like mites in a cheese—were packed nearly 100,000 human beings. Peers and Peeresses, Lords and Ladies, Senators of the Courts of Justice and the wretched waifs of society on whom they passed sentence. Clergymen in their gowns and Lawyers in theirs, Burgers and Knights of the Shire, tradesmen and artisans, taverners and pickpockets. "Caddies" flying—or crawling—on errands, water carriers groaning under the weight of their dripping barrels, barbers carrying the implements of their craft with them, ladies in Sedan-chairs, gentlemen on horseback, gentle and simple, rich, poor and penniless, people of culture and people of none; and a crowd of children,—like the stars of heaven for multitude, or as the sand of the seashore, innumerable;—crowded, jostled, rubbed elbows, and pressed each other into the nameless gutter that ran beside the pavements of the "Royal Mile."

Princes street in the imperial Edinburgh of to-day, makes a brave show on a sunny day in June. Fleet street and Cheapside have something to say for themselves on any day. Broadway is reported to carry a fair crowd, at most hours of the day or night. But for sheer human interest, for a packed weltering mass of humanity, for diversity ranging through the entire gamut of social possibilities—the world had never seen anything like the High street of Edinburgh. It was unique in Europe.

Long narrow gardens—fragments of which may still be seen in one or two cases—stretched behind the houses on the High Street, but as space became more valuable, they had to be utilized. Accordingly tenements were built over the gardens, and access to these was provided by means of a narrow paved alley running at right angles to the main thoroughfare. These two sentences give you the origin of a "Close." Naturally, the accommodation in these houses was even more cramped than in those on the High Street.

Our stranger's first morning walk through the city must have been an experience to be remembered. He had left the dainty, urbane, rational looking London; here he was in the midst of great fortresses of houses springing up storey after storey, the stories overlapping each other till the sky line was almost blotted out, while overhead there was a narrow strip of the pitiless blue sky of the north. The dark narrow Closes, at once inviting by their mystery and repelling by their cold abysmal horror. The sky line broken up by eccentric gables and turrets; the house fronts pleasantly varied by picturesque turnpike stairs, by carved lintels over the doorways, by carved stringcourses round windows of every conceivable variety, decayed or broken pilasters, projecting galleries, empty niches which had once held statues of the Saints, the Virgin, or the sad Christ. Nowhere else in the islands was there such a sight.

A city of contrast. Rich and poor mixing together, with the same Lord providing for them all,—providing for them in many cases in this grim city, under the same roof—even on the same stair landing. Piety and ribaldry rubbing shoulders, in this one street where they were forced to walk abreast; and with the same contrast expressing itself in imperishable record, even on the carved lintels. "The Lord is my only support," says one pious old Burgher. His neighbour, quoting a familiar distich of Horace, thinks a girl's dark eyes and a bottle of wine, will make a very fair substitute. Another of earlier date quotes in Latin a fragment of a prayer of the old Roman Church. "Have mercy upon me Oh God! from sin, dishonour, indebtedness, and sudden death, deliver me." Another carves the confession of his faith over his front door windows. "I take the Lord Jesus Christ as my only all sufficient portion to content me." While yet another blossoms out into a rhymed philosophy worthy of Martin Tupper. "Gif ye did as ye should, ye might live as ye would." The pathetic hope of our race for immortality, now expressed in the sobbing, gasping ejaculations of the Old Church; now in the calm triumphant words of Scripture, finds frequent expression. Noblemen have carved their escutcheons, loving husbands their own initials and those of their wives over the entrances of their houses. Guilds and Corporations display carved trophies of their trade emblems. Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Terence, Lucian, Persius,—all are laid under tribute; the Latin on these old stones showing how deeply Scotland had drunk of that old heathen philosophy. But always Horace as first favorite, with his witty, mischievous, and yet as a rule courteous passion for women's glorious beauty—and a beaker of wine to drown his sorrows in!

As you walk slowly up this ancient street, you discover that the city is for the citizens. Wherever public buildings have been demanded by the city's growth, these have had to be hustled out into the causeway. Thus on reaching the Tron Church, you find the city guard house, straddling half way across the street. It was perhaps the ugliest excrescence on the city's causeway. Its ungainly utility was