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David Laing, Antiquary and Bibliographer

DAVID LAING was born in Edinburgh on 8th May, 1793, and died there on 18th October, 1878, in his eighty-sixth year. He was one of the most eminent Scotsmen of his time, and probably did more than any other single man to elucidate the history and literature of Scotland and to settle them on sure foundations. 'He was,' says Professor Masson, writing in 1874, 'easily the prince of living authorities in all matters of Scottish history and biography.' 'The early literary history of his native country,' says Dr. John Alexander Smith, 'together with its ecclesiastical history since the period of the Reformation and the history of Scottish art were his special spheres of research, and in these departments he may be said to have stood almost alone.'

Five and thirty years have gone since he died, and although his work remains, a monument of his genius and industry, the man himself is becoming but a tradition to a generation who knew him not, 'for there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever, seeing that which now is, in the days to come shall all be forgotton.' Mr. Goudie's exhaustive biography will therefore be welcomed as an authentic record of his life and of what he accomplished.[1]

What manner of man was David Laing is a question which will be put to those who come after us. Friends who could fully and

[1] *David Laing, LL.D.: A Memoir of his Life and Literary Work.* By Gilbert Goudie, F.S.A.Scot. . . . With Introduction by Lord Guthrie, Edinburgh. Printed for private circulation by T. and A. Constable, 1913, 8vo, pp. xlii, 318; 5 illustrations. [250 copies printed.]

adequately have replied have passed away without doing so. He was so well known, he was so much appreciated, and bulked so largely in the eyes of his contemporaries that it seems never to have occurred to anyone that a time would come when his personality might disappear and he should be known only as a worker and master of his craft. As one of those who admired and honoured him while he lived, I may perhaps be allowed to to say something regarding him.

I knew David Laing for the last fourteen years of his life. My acquaintance with him began in 1864; when he was one year beyond the three score and ten and I was two and twenty. How he looked at that time may be seen in his portrait by Sir William Fettes Douglas; but the later painting by Herdman is more as I remember him. 'His general bearing,' writes one in 1864, 'is erect and dignified'; honest manliness, says another, was one of his characteristics. This was so. He was genial, bright, active and alert, and singularly accessible; always pleased to see you, always willing to help. He was apt to learn and ready to communicate. He saw your point at once, placed himself in your position, and explained your difficulty not as a mentor but as a fellow student. His information was vast and extended over a wide range of subjects. All of it was at his finger tips. He spoke as if the subject you introduced was the one uppermost in his thoughts, and answered your question without hesitancy. Whatever he knew he knew accurately and could state clearly and precisely. I never met anyone who could handle a book as he did; he knew its place, whatever it was, walked straight to the shelf, took it down, and was at your side again in a trice; the book seemed to open at the place wanted, and with a slight swing he laid it before you and put his finger to the passage. He was never impatient, gave you the attention that was required, but did not waste time on irrelevant discussion, and when he had disposed of your problem he went on with his own work as if there had been no interruption. Always busy himself, he had always time for others. He was consulted by scores of inquirers in my time, and was then, as he had been during the preceding fifty years, adviser general of all those interested in the early literature and history of Scotland.

From Sir Walter Scott downwards everyone consulted David Laing, and everyone did so to profit. In 1843, when Carlyle was engaged on *Cromwell*, he came to Scotland to visit the scene of the

Protector's victory at Dunbar. He wrote to his wife from Haddington on 4th September: 'Before quitting Edinburgh I had gone to David Laing and refreshed all my recollections by looking at his books, one of which he even lent me out thither.' 'His love for all letters,' says Professor Cosmo Innes, 'his willingness to assist all study have brought it to pass that, sitting in that fine Signet Library of which he holds the keys, he is consulted by everybody in every emergency.' 'He was,' says Mr. Thomas Constable, 'the courteous, painstaking, and efficient helper of all who need literary aid.'

Looking back over the work of his long life, we can see that he was the same man at the beginning as at the end. He grew and ripened, but the characteristics of his mature years were plainly visible in the young man.

His father William Laing (1764-1832) was an eminent and successful bookseller, with an extensive knowledge of books, particularly of those relating to Scotland. He was on terms of intimacy with all the literary men of Edinburgh, and with all the bibliophiles in Scotland and many of those in England. In his mother's portrait one recognises the features of the son, and can reasonably conjecture that it was from her that David Laing derived the genial manner, the even temper, the brightness and alertness which distinguished him. From his father no doubt he had his business aptitude, his exactness, his industry, his sagacity, and his common sense.

Introduced to his father's business at an early age, and with his father as instructor, he acquired without effort an extraordinary knowledge of books and of their contents. His father's knowledge seemed to pass to him by absorption; it was assimilated and made his own and added to day by day. When he was but sixteen years of age he had already achieved a reputation for bibliographical knowledge. He was at that time sent to London by his father as his business representative, and attended the sales of the libraries of Richard Porson and Alexander Dalrymple. In the following year he was in Dublin at the sale of Burton Cunningham's books. In 1812 he was present at the Roxburghe sale, for long one of the most famous in the annals of bibliography. Three years later Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe acknowledges his indebtedness to him. In 1818 John Gibson Lockhart celebrates him in verse:

> David the most sagacious and the best,
> As all old Reekie's erudites opine,

Of Scottish bibliopoles, who knows the zest
And name of every title-page Aldine;
A famous bibliomaniac and a shrewd,
Who turns his madness to no little good.

Next year he writes of him in prose: 'David Laing is still a very young man; but . . . he possesses a truly wonderful degree of skill and knowledge in almost all departments of bibliography.' He had already in 1815 published his first book, and this was of a bibliographical character, being a reprint of the Catalogue of 1627 of the books presented by William Drummond of Hawthornden to the library of the University of Edinburgh. At the close of his life a writer in the *Athenaeum* says: 'Mr. Laing's knowledge of bibliography was immense. Hardly anything of importance since the invention of printing had escaped his notice, and he was always ready with an answer to anyone who inquired about the best editions or the most perfect copies, and about their value.'

Laing, like Sir Walter Scott, had a deep affection for 'his own romantic town,' and did much to illuminate her history, and to create a living interest in her old streets and buildings and the men and women who peopled them, and gave them colour and story. Amongst the books and documents bequeathed by him to the University of Edinburgh there is a large collection of illustrations of Edinburgh antiquities.

The early literature of Scotland appealed strongly to him, and his best energies were devoted to its study and to bringing it before his countrymen. In 1821 he published the poems of Alexander Scott from a manuscript of 1568; at the time of his death he was engaged upon a new edition of the poetical works of Sir David Lyndsay, which appeared in 1879. In the fifty-seven intervening years he produced a long series of books of a similar character. This work has now been taken up, and is being carried on on the co-operative plan by the Scottish Text Society. Their aim is to provide a correct text, but chiefly as a philological instrument, as a means for studying the Scottish language. David Laing's object was to place before the people of Scotland the writings of her early authors and to interest them therein. 'They are valuable,' he remarks, 'no less in enabling us to trace the history and progress of our language than in assisting us to illustrate ancient manners and amusements, of which they often contain the liveliest representations.' He was particular about his texts

and painstaking in their elucidation, and his editions are a marked advance upon those of his predecessors. There is a tendency at the present day to depreciate his work and to underestimate its value. It was he, however, who laid the foundation upon which later scholars have built, and without which they could not have built. 'To publish the early remains of our national poetry with the correctness and fidelity which is requisite, recourse must be had to ancient and discordant manuscripts where the obscurity of the language, or the labour of decyphering them, is,' he says, 'the least perplexing or difficult part of the undertaking.' Our point of view is continually shifting. Laing's idea of editing differed from that of his precursors just as the ideas of fifty years hence will be different from those of to-day; the opinion then will probably be that the work of to-day is altogether out of joint. Laing's work requires no vindication; *unus vir non cernit omnia*, says the proverb, but in everything that he did he was thorough, conscientious, and illuminating. His care and accuracy have been frequently commended by scholars of the highest eminence. If he did not emphasize points which now seem important it was merely because he was viewing the problem from a different angle. He lighted the lamp and kept it burning brightly during his long life; it was he who stimulated and to a great degree created the interest in the language and literature of Scotland which now prevails.

No country owed more to the Reformation than Scotland. It developed and determined the national character. The life of the Scottish people was profoundly influenced by ecclesiastical questions. Laing, as a Scotsman, was deeply interested in these. His edition of the works of John Knox is monumental. He also edited Row's *History*, Scott of Cupar's *Apologetical Narration* and Forbes of Alford's *Records concerning the Church*, Calderwood's *History*, and the *Letters and Journals* of Robert Baillie, Principal of the University of Glasgow. He was warmly attached to the Church of Scotland, and, though a Liberal in politics, remained faithful to her in the great secession of 1843. On his death the General Assembly recorded their deep sense of the loss the Church had sustained and their appreciation of the services he had rendered in connection with her history and literature. It is to David Laing that patriotic Scotsmen are indebted for the small tablet [I.K. 1572.] let into the causeway of Parliament Square, to

mark that it was within this area, formerly the old burying-ground of St. Giles, that the great Reformer is buried.

We are so accustomed to societies and co-operative organizations of various kinds for the publication of historical, genealogical, and topographical manuscripts for reprinting rare books, for providing calendars, inventories and lists of literary and historical documents that we can with difficulty realize how important a part the older Book Clubs played in preserving and rendering accessible literary and historical material. The first and most important of the Scottish clubs was the Bannatyne, founded by Sir Walter Scott in 1823. David Laing was its first and only secretary, or more correctly honorary secretary,—as there was no remuneration,—and an *ex officio* member of the committee of management.

He was present at the inauguration of the club, being its fourth member, and was present at its dissolution in 1861, thirty-eight years later. Sir Walter Scott was the first president, and held office till his death in 1832. Thomas Thomson, who had been vice-president, was then advanced to the chair, and remained president until he died twenty years later. Scott's personality gave life to the club and made it a social success. No two men were more fitted than he and Thomas Thomson to direct its course, and, while preserving the general idea of the Roxburghe Club, after which it was modelled, to make its publications more generally useful and more national. David Laing, with the same knowledge and the same enthusiasm, was their faithful ally, and to him it fell to carry out the arrangements and transact the business of the club. It was a remarkable trio; they were the three men of the day most conversant with the literature of Scotland; each was an accomplished antiquary; Scott and Laing were unrivalled as bibliographers and bibliophiles, and Thomson was not undistinguished in the same pursuits; all were distinguished for sagacity, shrewdness, and geniality; but Thomson lacked the exactness, method, energy, and business capacity of the other two. The idea of the club had been in Scott's mind for some time. 'I have long thought,' he writes to Robert Pitcairn, 'that a something of a bibliomaniacal society might be formed here, for the prosecution of the important task of publishing *dilettante* editions of our national literary curiosities. Several persons of rank, I believe, would willingly become members, and there are enough of good operatives. What would you think of such an association? David Laing was ever keen for it; but the death of

Sir Alexander Boswell and of Alexander Oswald has damped his zeal. I think if a good plan were formed, and a certain number of members chosen, the thing would still do well.' The plan was no doubt arranged between Scott and Laing, and in a note prefixed to the Rules of 1823 was explained thus: 'The express object and design contemplated in this Association is, by means of an annual sum contributed by the members, to print in a uniform and handsome manner, a series of works illustrative of the History, Topography, Poetry, and Miscellaneous Literature of Scotland in former times.' The long list of works issued by the club shows how well the scheme was carried out. It is to be remembered that the selection of publications did not rest entirely with the committee of management. Many of the books were printed at the expense of individual members, and their personal fancies and wishes had to be humoured. It lay principally with the secretary to find a donor and to guide his choice in a suitable direction. Some of the members were Philistines, and, although pleased to belong to a select literary society, took little or no interest in its objects. Lord Cockburn was one of these. He was an original member, and along with Thomas Maitland, afterwards Lord Dundrennan, his brother-in-law, presented Hector Boethius' *Lives of the Bishops of Morthlach and Aberdeen*, reprinted from the edition which appeared at Paris in 1522. In 1832 he was elected vice-president of the club, when he records in his Journal: 'Very few of us can read our books, and still fewer can understand them; yet type, morocco, and the corporation spirit make us print on, and this quite independently of the temptation arising from the marketable worth of what we get being far beyond what we pay.' His own contribution, printed without preface or note, he probably never read. Maitland was, however, interested in Boece. He reprinted Bellenden's translation of the History in 1821, to which he prefixed a biographical notice of the author. He was for some years a member of the committee of management of the club, and had a high appreciation of David Laing. An ardent bibliophile, he is referred to by Dibdin as 'the folio-aspiring Maitland.' For the Maitland Club, Cockburn and Maitland reprinted the interesting Works of George Dalgarno of Aberdeen on the Education of the Deaf and Dumb, sympathetically noticed by Sir William Hamilton in the *Edinburgh Review* of July, 1835.

The office of secretary was no sinecure. 'I have no wish,' says David Laing, 'to exaggerate the extent of my continuous labour;

but no one can imagine how much of my time was so spent—days and nights, with frequent and sometimes distant journeys—on matters more or less connected with the Club; and wearisome enough work besides, with doubts occasionally springing up in my mind whether a person like myself, having always a very limited income, was justified year after year in thus spending the best period of his life.' Having undertaken the work, he performed it as no other person could have done, and the success of the club was largely due to him. It must be kept in view that down till the year 1837 he was actively engaged in business in Edinburgh as a bookseller, that thereafter, until the date of his death, he was keeper of the Signet Library, a duty which engrossed the whole business day, and he never neglected either his own business or his duties as librarian. On the other hand, he enjoyed excellent health, he worked with great rapidity, he was a master of method, he took each thing in its turn and finished it, he acquired information quickly and accurately and assimilated it at once; he had it all before his mind in orderly fashion and could reproduce it on the instant. Notwithstanding the many calls upon his time and his 'limited income,' he contributed to the publications of the club from its foundation. In 1823 he edited *The Buke of the Howlat*, from Asloan's manuscript collated with the copy in George Bannatyne's manuscript, and presented it to the members. He dealt fully with the poem in a long and carefully written preface, to which Scott contributed an interesting note. The volume was printed in black letter, and was furnished with a quaint title-page designed by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe.

In the same year the club resolved that a Miscellany 'be printed in successive numbers and parts, under the joint superintendence of the President and Secretary,' probably 'the tome miscellaneous' referred to in Scott's Club song, to be mentioned presently:

> Then hear your Committee, and let them count o'er
> The deeds they intend in their three volumes more.
> They'll produce you King Jamie the Sapient and Sext,
> And the Bok of Dumblaine and the Bishops come next;
> One tome miscellaneous they'll add to your store,
> Resolving next year to print four volumes more.
> Four volumes more, my friends, four volumes more,
> Pay down your subscriptions for four volumes more.

The first tome of the Miscellany appeared in 1827, containing twenty-four tracts relating to Scottish history and letters, and

among them the description of Edinburgh, in 1550, by Alexander Alesius or Alesse, a native of Edinburgh. All of these were furnished with introductory notices and explanatory notes by Laing, which contain a great store of valuable historical, biographical, and bibliographical information, much of which could have been provided by no other person. The account of Edinburgh is copiously annotated and illustrated with a reproduction of an old plan of the city of 1544 and of Gordon of Rothiemay's view of the old palace of Holyrood house engraved by De Witt about 1650. The Miscellany is referred to not as in itself remarkable, but merely in order to show the amount of work which Laing performed anonymously, and as part of his secretarial duties.

Thomas Thomson's besetting sin was procrastination, and a morbid reluctance to commit his opinions to paper. The various books which he presented to or superintended for the club he allowed to go forth without any worthy preface. He took no care 'to put a staff in the hand or a hat on the head' of the stranger, as Scott used to say of his own stories. He promised, made good resolutions, but failed to accomplish. The 'Gray Papers' were printed for the club under his superintendence, and were then kept on hand for five months. The distribution, as explained in a slip issued to the members, 'was delayed from time to time, in the hope that the volume would be accompanied by a short Prefatory Notice, which, considering the quarter from which it was expected, could not fail to have added much to its value.' This note was no doubt from the pen of the secretary, and indicates the character of his troubles. The value of club publications depends to a large extent on the manner in which they are placed before the reader. Laing always endeavoured to provide all the assistance necessary to enable one to take the author's standpoint and to follow his narrative. Thomas Carlyle, speaking of his edition of Baillie's *Letters and Journals*, which was edited for the club, says Mr. Laing 'has exhibited his usual industry, sagacity, correctness in this case, and done his work well. The notes are brief, illuminative ever in the right place; and what he will praise withal, not over plenteous, nor more of them than needed.'

The club was not, like the big societies of to-day, composed of persons who, as a rule, have no acquaintance with each other and only meet to pass accounts, adopt reports, and elect office-bearers. The Bannatyne was a small body of men all known to one another and all on terms of intimate friendship. It met as a

social body quite as much as a business body, and dinners and song helped to give them solidarity.

Laing was as punctual in his attendance at these functions as at business meetings. The club was inaugurated by a dinner in Barry's Hotel, Princes Street, at which Scott presided. As they were separating he recited two or three lines extempore, 'Assist me, ye lads, who love books and old wine.' Being asked to write down the words, he produced in a couple of days the famous Bannatyne Garland, fitted to the tune of 'One Bottle More,' which thus began:

> Assist me, ye friends of old books and old wine,
> To sing in the praises of sage Bannatyne,
> Who left such a treasure of old Scottish lore
> As enables each age to print one volume more.
> One volume more, my friends, one volume more,
> We'll ransack old Banny for one volume more.

At the annual club dinner, it was wont to be sung with full effect by Sir Walter's old friend, James Ballantyne, one of the original members, the whole company joining in the chorus.

'Ane Bannatyne Garlande, brevit be Maister Patrick of the Kingis Chekar,' that is Patrick Fraser Tytler, at that time crown counsel in Exchequer causes, opens thus:

> Chairman dear, since we're here,
> Once more met in Barry's hottel,
> Let us hear, chairman dear,
> What we've got in hand;
> Take your claret—never spare it,
> Wet your Antiquarian throttle,
> Then in glory tell your story,
> What's been done or plann'd.

Scott records that at their *gaudeamus* in November of their first year, that is 1823, they drank their wine *more majorum*, with disastrous results to the famous John Clerk, who had just been raised to the bench under the title of Lord Elden.

David Laing in 1824 presented as a garland at the anniversary meeting, *The Poems of George Bannatyne*, a prose tract describing the manuscript, and ending 'Finis, quoth the Secretary.' He also essayed 'A Bannatyne Song for the Anniversary Meeting, 1825—*To be sung to its own proper accompaniment.*' Whether it was sung does not appear. At any rate, it was not enshrined in James Ballantyne's black letter, as were many of the other songs. Of a club dinner in January, 1827, Scott records: 'We

drank to our old Scottish heroes, poets, historians, and printers, and were funny enough.'

The meetings of the committee of management were likewise social functions. 'My dear Peter,' writes Scott to Tytler, 'Not seeing you last night, I had no opportunity to say that a meeting of the Bannatynian Committee takes place tomorrow at five o'clock for business; at ½ past five for a haggis. *Avis au lecteur.* Yours truly, W. Scott.' Again to the vice-president: 'Dear Thomas, The committee of Bannatynians dine here on Friday first, meeting at five for business, and dinner at half past five. Without you we are a tongueless trump.' Without Laing they would have been a knotless thread. Scott continued to take a lively and active interest in all the affairs of the club until the day he set out from Abbotsford on his last journey to the south of Europe on account of his health. At that time he wrote to David Laing: 'I am going away sad enough, as I feel no great certainty of ever returning again; in which case my Presidency shall another take. Always, dear Mr. Secretary, most faithfully yours, Walter Scott.'

Although a hard worker and wasting no time on frivolity, Laing was eminently social, always glad to meet his friends, to entertain and to be entertained. 'When you see my dear friend David Laing,' writes Allan Cunningham, 'greet him kindly from me. He is kind, honest, straightforward and forgiving.' Lockhart, in his account of 1818, says: 'This old gentleman [William Laing] and his son are distinguished by their classical taste, in regard to other things besides books—and, amongst the rest, in regard to wines—a subject touching which it is fully more easy for them to excite the sympathy of the knowing ones of Edinburgh. They give an annual dinner to Wastle, and he carried me with him the other day to one of these anniversaries. I have seldom seen a more luxurious display. We had claret of the most exquisite Lafitte flavour, which foamed in the glass like the cream of strawberries and went down as cool as the nectar of Olympus. David and Wastle entertained us with an infinite variety of stories about George Buchanan, the Admirable Crichtonius, and all the more forgotton heroes of the *Deliciae Poetarum Scotorum.* What precise share of the pleasure might be due to the claret and what to the stories, I shall not venture to enquire; but I have rarely spent an evening more pleasantly. *P.S.*—They are also very curious in sherry.'

Thomas Frognall Dibden was an early friend. In describing

his visit to Edinburgh in 1838 he records: 'Dining one day with Dr. Lee at the suburban villa of our common friend Mr. David Laing, we were regaled in the evening with a sight—yea a sniff—of some of the rare pieces of the Reformer in possession of our host, of which *Ane Admonition*, &c., 1554, 12mo, is considered to be his first publication. Most cruelly did Mr. Laing flicker the gilt tooling upon this morocco-coated tome in the eyes of his reverend guest, Dr. Lee. 'Name your price,' said the Doctor, unable to sustain the shock of such a battery any longer, 'and I will give it.' The quondam Bibliopolist was obdurate; said nothing; smiled; and passed the book into his inner coat pocket. But Dr. Lee is a match for his host; for he possesses what is *Most Rare*, the *autograph* of the Great Reformer.' In an account of a bibliographical dinner given by Mr. W. B. D. D. Turnbull, none of the speeches, it is said, 'came up to the impassioned eloquence which seemed to flow spontaneously from the lips of Mr. David Laing when he toasted 'The immortal memory of Chapman and Millar, the first printers of Scotland.' I thought the ceiling must have dropt—from the intensity and long continuance of the 'hurrahs' which immediately ensued.' The sobriety of the party is vouched for by the fact that at the conclusion of the banquet there was not one who could not read the most diminutive colophon.

'It was only the other day,' writes one shortly after his death, 'that he gave a dinner to a number of his brethren of the Society of Antiquaries on the occasion of the visit of his friend Professor Daniel Wilson of Toronto to Edinburgh, and it was curious to see the old man sipping his Madeira with as much relish, and enjoying his old-world talk as keenly as Lockhart in his 'Peter's Letters' records his doing some sixty or more years ago.' 'In company,' says another, 'he was extremely happy and could both give and take a joke.' He had a merry laugh. One day I had been to the Edinburgh University Library to examine their manuscript of Fordun. On my way back I looked in at the Signet Library to see David Laing. I told him what I had been doing, and that Mr. Small had pointed out the *Ballad of the Nine Nobles*, which, he said, he had just discovered, and proposed to publish. He chuckled and remarked with a smile, 'Mr. Small is always making some discovery. Why, I printed it more than fifty years ago,' and put his *Select Remains of Ancient Popular Poetry of Scotland* into my hands.

It might have been thought that the management of the

Bannatyne Club, in addition to the care of his own business, would have been sufficient to absorb the energies of one man, but David Laing found time for a great deal more. He was a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for over fifty-four years. He acted as treasurer, vice-president, and secretary. He placed its financial affairs upon a sound basis, and enriched its proceedings with a long series of communications of the highest importance, beginning in March, 1824, and ending in May, 1878. He did not confine his labours to the Society or to the Bannatyne Club, but did much excellent work for the Abbotsford Club, the Wodrow Society, the Shakespeare Society, the Spalding Club of Aberdeen, and the Hunterian Club of Glasgow.

Besides all this, he prepared and published a large number of books on his own account, principally relating to the early literature of Scotland. His *Select Remains of the Early Popular Poetry of Scotland*; his *Fugitive Scottish Poetry*; and his *Early Metrical Tales*, published between 1822 and 1826, are of the same character as the reprints which Professor Arber provided for English students fifty years later. The first of these he inscribed 'as a slight but sincere tribute of respect to THE DISTINGUISHED AUTHOR, to whom, of all others, the Literature of his Native Country is most deeply beholden.' For the last Sharpe etched a characteristic frontispiece.

Laing was also deeply interested in the fortunes of the drama in Scotland, and in the early history of Scottish art, and did much to illustrate both of these subjects. In 1854 the Royal Scottish Academy elected him their honorary Professor of Antiquities, and in 1861 he was translated to their honorary chair of Ancient History. During that year and the next he delivered three most interesting lectures on Scottish art and artists. He bequeathed to the Academy an important collection of drawings and sketches by the Old Masters, which were arranged by a committee of the Academy and bound in nineteen folio volumes, and were in 1910 transferred to the trustees of the National Gallery. To the National Gallery itself he left several pictures. In 1855 he advocated a national exhibition of Scottish portraits, in which he was supported by Thomas Carlyle, who wrote him a long letter upon the subject; and the formation of a National Portrait Gallery for Scotland was a matter which he had very much at heart. Although he did not live to see the project carried into effect, he bequeathed to the Society of Antiquaries a large number of portraits to be held by them until they could be properly exhibited

as a contribution to such a collection. His friend, William Douglas, afterwards Sir William Fettes Douglas, P.R.S.A., painted his portrait in 1863 and presented it to the Academy, and it is now in the National Gallery.

This and the portrait by Herdman bring vividly before us the personality of David Laing, and present the aspect of the inner man as seen by two great artists. Carlyle, in the letter referred to, says that in all his historical investigations 'it has been, and always is, one of the most primary wants to procure a bodily likeness of the personage inquired after; a good *Portrait* if such exists: failing that, even an indifferent if sincere one. In short, *any* representation, made by a faithful human creature, of that Face and Figure, which *he* saw with his eyes, and which I can never see with mine, is now valuable to me, and much better than none at all. This, which is my own deep experience, I believe to be, in a deeper or less deep degree, the universal one; and that every student and reader of History, who strives earnestly to conceive for himself what manner of Fact and *Man* this or the other vague Historical *Name* can have been, will, as the first and directest indication of all, search eagerly for a Portrait, for all the reasonable Portraits there are; and never rest till he have made out, if possible, what the man's natural face was like.' A portrait, he says, lights up biography and puts some human interpretation into it. Remembering how David Laing lived and wrought, and how he bore himself in his intercourse with the world, these portraits enable us to look beyond the surface and to get a glimpse of the inner man.

Reference has been made to David Laing's proficiency as a bibliographer. He was likewise an unwearied, skilful, and successful book-hunter. With unrivalled knowledge and untiring energy he was able to bring together and place upon his shelves almost all that was worth having in a collection of early Scottish printing and literature. He had in perfection the qualities which distinguished the thrice-honoured 'Snuffy Davy'; 'he had the scent of a slow-hound, and the snap of a bull-dog. He would detect you an old black-letter ballad among the leaves of a law-paper, and find an *editio princeps* under the mask of a school Corderius.'

Booksellers' catalogues of a hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago were more serious affairs than those of our day. As a rule they appeared but once a year; they were divided into

sections something after the style of the French catalogues, and embraced many thousands of volumes. William Laing issued such catalogues from 1786 onwards. In 1795 he published David Macpherson's excellent edition of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Chronykil of Scotland*, and on the editor's death, in 1816, he purchased his library. In 1819 he issued a Supplement to his Sale Catalogue of 1818, 'containing several recent purchases and importations from the continent, with an extensive collection of books connected with the history and literature of Scotland, including, with some other libraries, that of the late David Macpherson, Esq.' The Scottish section extends to 105 pages and contains 1554 numbers; the portion relating to 'Literature preceding the Union with England, A.D. 1707,' has 338 numbers and 39 pages. There can be little doubt that David Laing assisted in the preparation of this Supplement, if it was not actually his work. I have his own interleaved copy, in which many additional Scottish books are noted. He must have passed everyone of the books through his hands, and have made himself acquainted with their character and contents. There is a copy of the Supplement in the Signet Library which was evidently used in the shop, as in many cases the names of the purchasers are noted. Amongst them were Sir Walter Scott, George Chalmers, Dr. John Lee, Patrick Fraser Tytler, Dr. Hibbert, Richard Heber, the Right Hon. Thomas Grenville, Lieutenant-General Munro, Governor of Madras; R. P. Gillies, Archibald Constable, George Ticknor, of Boston, the historian of Spanish literature, who was in Edinburgh in 1819; the Royal Library, Copenhagen; the Advocates' Library, the Signet Library, Ogles & Co., booksellers, London, for many years the agents and correspondents of William Laing; E. Charnley, bookseller, Newcastle-on-Tyne; A. Brown & Co., booksellers in Aberdeen, and the well-known John Wylie & Co., booksellers in Hutcheson Street, Glasgow. David Laing was thus in a position which enabled him to cultivate and mature to the highest point his inborn taste for books. The catalogue of 1818 contains an excellent collection of works on bibliography, and other catalogues had the like, so that the best bibliographical information was in his hands.

Besides several journeys to London in addition to those previously alluded to, he visited the Continent professionally in 1816 and again in 1819. In the latter year he extended his journey to Copenhagen 'to arrange some long outstanding accounts with Dr. Moldenhawer of the Royal Library'—which, as we have seen,

was a customer of William Laing—and likewise to Sweden. James Wilson, the well-known zoologist, brother of 'Christopher North,' accompanied him on both occasions, and on the former Adam Black was of the party. The latter records that in Paris they spent most of their time in the bookshops and on the Quais, 'where they secured many valuable books in beautiful old bindings, remains of the noble libraries of princes and aristocrats, confiscated during the great Revolution.' Laing also carried off a quantity of prints. In Paris he had an adventure. Locked into the Tuileries by accident, he was challenged by a watchman, who struck him a whack on the side of his head, knocking off his hat. 'Fortunately David had learned at the High School how to use his fists, and he now did so.' Adam Black was a lifelong friend, and when in later years the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had passed into his hands, David Laing wrote a number of articles for it.

William Carew Hazlitt records that 'there was a time, and not so distant, when Edinburgh, and even Dublin, yielded their proportion of finds, and the Duke of Roxburghe and General Swinton, David Laing and James Maidment, obtained no insignificant share of their extremely curious and valuable stores from their own ground.' The capital of Scotland, he adds, 'has lost its ancient prestige as a cover for this sort of sport, and is as unproductive as an ordinary English provincial town.' The latter statement may be questioned, but the former is true. Glasgow in those old days was also fair ground for the book-hunter. William Blackwood spent a year, 1798-99, in Glasgow as agent of Mundell & Company, the publishers, and writes to Archibald Constable of his finds of rare old books.

David Laing paid visits in quest of books to all likely places. Shortly after his death a London bookseller told me he had served his apprenticeship in a town in the north of England and remembered him well. When he came to the shop he took off his coat, and ransacked the shelves from floor to ceiling, and generally carried off a large parcel.

William Laing, as we learn from Mr. Goudie's memoir, was not a collector. His son must have been one from an early date, no doubt from the time he could afford to pay for his purchases. Dibdin's narrative indicates that he had a good library in 1838, and it was only in the previous year that he abandoned bookselling as a business. He then disposed of his stock by auction, but he probably retained for his private collection whatever was

worth taking and which was not already there; and during the next forty years he can have lost no opportunity of making additions, and no one had ever a greater gift of what Horace Walpole styled serendipity, the luck of falling on what you want, by which, for instance, Scott dropped on a Leipsic collection of Spanish Ballads recommended to him by Ticknor.

In 1818 the librarianship of the Faculty of Advocates fell vacant. Sir William Hamilton strongly urged the appointment of Dr. Benecke, then professor and librarian in the University of Göttingen, but after some negotiation he declined nomination. David Laing then offered himself as a candidate with the support of Sir Walter Scott, but in the meantime other candidates had been in the field, and the electors had to some extent committed themselves, and after much delay the appointment was given to David Irving, a man of considerable erudition and bibliographical knowledge. He had been a law tutor or coach for many years, and had written a good Introduction to the Civil Law, and it may have been thought that a man with a special knowledge of the literature of law was desirable. Irving was sent to Göttingen to learn something of library administration, but his management of the Advocates' Library was not a success, and gave rise to much complaint.

In 1821 David Laing was assumed by his father as a partner and so continued until the death of the latter in 1832. He thereafter carried on the business until 1837, when he received the appointment of keeper of the large and admirably selected library of the Society of Writers to the Signet.

David Irving retired from the librarianship of the Advocates' Library in 1848, when David Laing was again a candidate, but withdrew when he became aware of the duties proposed to be assigned to the librarian, some of which he considered to belong to the position of a subordinate. Speaking forty-six years later of his failure in 1820, he says: 'I did regret my want of success, feeling at the time, and ever since, that I could have done much for the Library which it required and still requires.' This will not be questioned. His knowledge of books and of literature, his exactness and long business experience, would have been of the greatest benefit to the Faculty, and, on the other hand, the position would have been very acceptable to Laing, for, although private property, the library is after all a national institution.

When the University of Edinburgh required assistance in the re-arrangement of their library, it was to David Laing that they turned, and he carried out what they desired in an admirable manner. Sir Alexander Boswell laments, in 1819, that the Advocates had not long ago seen their way to form a collection of books relating to Scotland. 'Even now, as a national library, they ought to direct their attention to such books as relate to the history and progress of the literature of Scotland, for there should not be a book in existence connected with either that is not to be found in that collection.' This was Laing's idea, and he sought to carry it into effect as respects his private library. Had he been at the head of the Advocates' Library, his energies would have found scope in making it what Sir Alexander pictured. James Maidment, speaking of the dispersion, in 1827, of the extraordinary collection of Broadsides which had been formed in the preceding century by the indefatigable Robert Mylne, says: 'It is a subject of regret that so singular a collection should have been divided, and it affords one proof amongst many of the inexcusable neglect of those who at the time had charge of the interests of the Advocates' Library, as the entire mass, many articles of which were unique, might have been deposited in that national establishment at the expense of a few pounds.' Certainly David Laing would not have allowed them to slip, and, as it was, he purchased a portion on his own account.

The Scottish section of George Chalmers' library was 'one of the most valuable collections of works on the history and literature of Scotland ever formed by a private individual' prior to his time, and he was loathe to see it dispersed. He had it in his mind to bequeath it to the Advocates, but he was so much disappointed by the appointment made in 1820 that he did not do so, and it was ultimately sold by auction in 1840. Had Laing been keeper of the Advocates' Library it is highly probable, therefore, that they would have become the possessors of this collection, and that he himself would have followed his old friend's example, and bequeathed to it what of his was characteristically Scottish. When, upon Laing's death, it became known that his library was in the market it seemed to me that it would be a national misfortune if it was broken up. Sir William Hamilton's library had been acquired a few years before for the University of Glasgow by twenty citizens subscribing £100 each; I went accordingly to the late Mr. A. B. M'Grigor, LL.D., and

suggested that we might try to find a hundred men or more to subscribe £100 each to buy David Laing's collection. He entered warmly into the plan, and I wrote to the law agents of the estate asking at what price the executors would dispose of it by private treaty. The reply was that the trustees must sell by auction, and the scheme accordingly fell through. It now appears that by codicil dated 19th June, 1875, he directed, after certain bequests of manuscripts and other collections, that the whole of his printed books should be sent to London for sale by public auction, where he says 'such books are more highly appreciated and more carefully catalogued than in this place.'

What ailed him at the Edinburgh auctioneers does not appear. They were a notable fraternity. John Ballantyne, Scott's 'Rigdumfunnidos,' presided in the rostrum for several years, and, amongst other libraries, sold in 1813 those of James, second Duke of Queensberry, and Alexander Hunter Gibson of Blackness. His sales by auction, he advertised, 'are conducted on the most liberal principles.' Then came D. Speare, who sold several large libraries, and prepared some good catalogues. He was succeeded by Charles Tait, 'the sententious Tait,' as Burton styles him, 'a man of taste and a collector.' It was he, or rather his firm of C. B. Tait and Son, who disposed of Thomas Thomson's library. The firm then became C. B. Tait and T. Nisbet. Thomas Nisbet, 'the great Nisbet,' was a celebrated auctioneer of literary property, whose catalogues were quite equal to any produced in London. C. B. Tait and T. Nisbet sold the libraries of W. B. D. D. Turnbull, of Lord Dundrennan, of Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, and of C. B. Tait himself: Nisbet disposed of those of Lord Cockburn, Lord Rutherfurd, and Principal Lee (the sale of 1859-63). Nisbet's successor, Thomas Chapman, was just as competent, and passed under the hammer a large number of libraries rich in books relating to Scotland. Just about the date of the codicil, Mr. Chapman assumed his son as a partner, and Laing may have thought that T. Chapman and Son might not maintain the reputation of Thomas Chapman and Thomas Nisbet. What might have been the fortune of a sale in Edinburgh one cannot say; the London one was an eminent success, the books realising £16,537 and the prints £270.

The Laing catalogue, prepared in London, does not rise above mediocrity, and gives an inadequate view of the library as a

Scottish collection. The sale catalogues of the libraries of James Gibson-Craig (1887-88) and of John Scott (1905), also sold in London, are much better, but assistance in the preparation of the latter was obtained in Edinburgh. The catalogues of Lord Rutherfurd's library by Nisbet (1855); of Professor William Stevenson, by Thomas Chapman (1874); of Maidment (1880) and of Whitefoord Mackenzie (1886), both by T. Chapman and Son, are quite as good, and more useful as aids to Scottish bibliography than the London ones.

The Laing sale attracted an unusual amount of attention and the books brought excellent prices. The character of a library is too apt to be judged by its money value. David Laing possessed some rare and some very remarkable books, but they were acquired not on account of their rarity or other accidental qualities, but because they were necessary to form a Scottish collection, or related to some other subject, *e.g.*, early printing, in which he was specially interested.

Barbour's *Bruce*, Edinburgh 1571; Blind Harry's *Wallace*, Edinburgh 1661; Sir David Lyndesay's *Dialog betuix Experience and ane Courteour*, [St. Andrews 1554]; his *Works*, Paris 1558; Roland's *Seven Sages*, Edinburgh 1620; Lauder's *Compendious Tractate*, [Edinburgh 1556]; *Psalmes in Meter*, Edinburgh 1596; Archbishop Hamilton's *Catechisme*, Sanct Androus 1552; *Confession of Faith*, Halyrud House 1580; Nicolay d'Arfeville, *Navigation du Roy d'Ecosse*, Paris 1583; King James' *Essayes of a Prentise*, Edinburgh 1585; The Edinburgh Bible of 1633; are all books of the greatest rarity, and together sold for £743 15s., but are all such as should find a place in a typical Scottish library.

The differences in the values of books is remarkable. Henry Balnaues' *Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh 1584, was sold in Chalmers' sale in 1840 for 24s. and at Laing's fetched £7 2s. 6d., and its description in the Chalmers' catalogue is the better. In the Scott sale a copy—presented by Boswell of Auchinleck to Archibald Constable—made £5 10s., but was afterwards returned as imperfect. Laing's copy of Zachary Boyd's *Last Battell* sold for £52 10s; Whitefoord Mackenzie's for £48 6s; and Scott's for £13 15s (slightly imperfect), while Chalmers' copy with two others of Boyd's works brought only £2 3s; Nicol Burne's *Disputation*, Paris 1581, produced £24 10s. at Laing's; £14 at Scott's and 18s. at Chalmers' sale. Laing, through Thorpe, purchased Chalmers' copy of *The Confession of the Fayth*, Edinburgh 1561, for £5 15s. 6d.; and Knox's *Exposition upon the Fourth of*

Matthew, London 1583, for £2 10s.; at his own sale the former produced £62 10s. and the latter £20 10s. Knox's *Admonition*, [from Wittenburge by Nicolas Dorcaster], which Laing flickered before the eyes of Dr. Lee, he bought at the Heber sale for £6 11s.; it realised £65 at his own. Another of Laing's books referred to by Dibdin was Knox's *Liturgy* (Geneva) 1561, which, he says, was presumed to be the only perfect copy known. At this sale it brought £45 10s.

Laing had many books interesting from association, *e.g.*, the *Metrical Psalms* of 1603, with the autograph of Sir David Lyndesay; Pinkerton's *History* with notes by James Chalmers, and a letter from Ritson stigmatising Pinkerton as 'a forgeër, impostour, and the greatest lyeër of all'; Ritson, it will be remembered, had peculiar views upon spelling; Cicero's *Academicae Quaestiones*, Paris 1544, with the autograph and notes of George Buchanan and the autograph 'D. Lyndesius'. This I purchased, and have now presented to the library of the University of Glasgow that it may again join the stately row of books which also bear Buchanan's autograph, and once formed part of his library, and were presented by him to the University in 1578.

Another interesting book was the first edition of Lord Stair's *Institutions of the Law of Scotland*, the dedication copy to Charles II. bound in red morocco with the Royal Arms on the sides. The late Earl of Stair was naturally anxious to get it, and, in his eagerness to make sure, he inadvertently instructed two agents who bid against each other, until it was knocked down to the sturdier at £295. A similar contretemps occurred recently in Edinburgh, over an old chair, of doubtful genealogy, which a deceased peer coveted, and for which two spirited agents made him pay a ransom.

The auction room, says Caillot, 'est tout à-la-fois le mont de piété, et la bourse de la librairie.' The dispersion of a library such as Laing's is a harvest for collectors, but its retention for national objects would be better for the community. Lord Cockburn regrets the inevitable sale. 'In Edinburgh at least the pleasure of collecting seems to be the only pleasure that collectors are destined to enjoy. Glenlee, I understand, made a sort of entail of his library by a strange but effective trust, so that his heirs cannot sell, having only the use of it. This has saved his library *as yet*, but, with this exception, all the considerable Edinburgh collections have been dissipated by the hammer of

the auctioneer. Thomas Thomson's, so rich in history, went first. Then Macvey Napier's, small but very choice, in moroccoed literature. Next Kirkpatrick Sharpe's, which is announced, composed chiefly of antiquarian oddities. A few days ago that of a strange person called Turnbull, gorgeous in local histories, went; and in a few days more that of my friend Thomas Maitland (the late Lord Dundrennan) will be separated into its atoms. His, to my taste, was the best of them all, consisting of above 5000 of the most readable volumes, in the most beautiful order. And there was Principal Lee's (the sale of 1842), loaded with historical and chiefly Scotch varieties, but all in abominable condition. I could name some more that must one day be sacrificed, one very fine one in particular. Scott's made the narrowest possible escape.'

The library at Abbotsford was arranged according to a classification made by Sir Walter, which, although defective, was retained, as he had accustomed himself to it. In and prior to 1827 he had a catalogue, with index of subjects, prepared by George Huntly Gordon, his amanuensis and librarian. After Scott's death the additions between 1827 and 1832 were incorporated by J. G. Cochrane, librarian of the Loudon library, and the catalogue was then printed and presented in 1838 by Major Sir Walter Scott, Bart., to the members of the Bannatyne Club, 'as a slight return for their liberality and kindness in agreeing to continue to that [the Abbotsford] Library the various valuable works printed under their superintendence.' At the same time copies were provided for the Maitland Club, as the contribution of John Gibson Lockhart. The descriptions of the books might have been made fuller, but the catalogue was intended for Sir Walter's own use, and not as a contribution to bibliography. It is, however, of value as a record of many rare and curious books relating to Scotland, and is of much interest as indicating the material with which Scott worked, and from which he acquired his marvellous knowledge of Scottish history and life.

Lord Neaves, in his Memoir of Principal Lee, refers to the then recent sale of his library of upwards of 20,000 volumes, and adds, 'I believe there was not one of his books he did not know, as well as it could be known, the authorship, the occasion, the object, and the import. The subject of Bibliography had been from his early years a favourite study; and his habits of assiduity and perseverance, as well as his capacious and retentive memory, enabled him to prosecute it with singular success. Nor was his

intellectual power overlaid or paralysed by the immense mass of his acquired knowledge.' This applied still more exactly to David Laing. He had all the erudition of the Principal, his skill in bibliography, and thorough acquaintance with the insides of his books and turned all to the best account, which we must regret that Dr. Lee did not do. His long projected work on the ecclesiastical and literary history of Scotland, for which he had collected material for more than forty-five years, never appeared. A catalogue of Laing's library would have been of no use to himself, but it would have been of immense service to scholars. He could not personally have undertaken so great an enterprise, but it could have been carried through with proper assistance. The idea, however, probably never occurred to him.

Other scholars were alive to the value of a catalogue. It was the anxious wish of Dr. Parr that his library should remain entire, and that it should be purchased by some opulent and liberal nobleman, or, preferably, by some public body. Dr. Edward Maltby, his pupil and friend, and afterwards bishop of Durham, pointed out that it might be difficult to keep the books together, and that, if they were, they might be absorbed in some mightier mass, such as the British Museum, and so lose their individuality. He accordingly recommended him 'to prepare a *catalogue raisonnée*, with such observations upon any book as his well-stored mind and accurate memory would readily suggest.' Parr acted on this suggestion, and a catalogue was drawn up in which he inserted a few observations here and there. These were mostly of a desultory character, and few of them are of any real importance, but they indicate how valuable such a catalogue could be made by an owner possessed of discrimination and learning, who could at first hand tell something of the books and their authors.

The sale catalogue of Laing's library is helpful as regards the more costly books, but is of little or no use as regards thousands of others which have not a similar market value, and which are quite as necessary for purposes of research. It is the latter which require to be recorded. Had they been described as carefully as Laing would have insisted on, and had he added notes on the more interesting articles, we should have had a pharos to Scottish bibliography and a monument worthy of the library, and less cause to regret its dispersion. When speaking of a catalogue of the projected Scottish National Portrait Exhibition, Carlyle writes to Laing: 'What value and excellence might lie in such a catalogue, if

rightly done, I need not say to David Laing; nor what labour, knowledge, and resources, would be needed to do it well! Perhaps divided among several men (with some *head* to preside over all), according to the several *periods* and classes of subject;—I can perceive *work* enough for *you*, amongst others, there! But, on the whole, it could be done; and it would be well worth doing, and a permanently useful thing.' This is quite as appropriate to a catalogue of a library such as that which David Laing had formed.

David Laing was not a gossip, he did not deal in reminiscences, or retail stories to casual listeners. He had met most of the interesting men of two generations; many of them he knew intimately. From his father he had heard much of those of an earlier generation, and had a fund of information regarding them, which he was quite ready to communicate on proper occasions. He would, however, have thought it a breach of confidence to write about his friends and acquaintances. Even had he thought otherwise, 'Recollections' are generally unsatisfactory; the writers seem to miss the point; they tell what is of little moment, and omit what we want to know. His reticence as to Thomas Thomson is remarkable. He was on the most intimate terms of friendship with him; their tastes and pursuits were the same; they had worked together for many years; Thomson had been one of his father's executors, yet when it came to providing material for his life he told nothing. Cosmo Innes acknowledges his assistance, but Laing gave us no picture of the man, no anecdote, no side-light of any kind. One of the most striking features of Boswell's immortal biography is the store of curious information that he obtained from Johnson about the many literary men, distinguished and obscure, with whom he had come in contact. Talker as he was, Johnson would not have communicated it had he not been forced to yield it up by the quick wit of Boswell. David Laing was always ready to give information and to answer questions, in order to clear up a difficulty or the like; but it is a question whether he would have responded even to a Boswell.

No one has more fitly answered the question, What manner of man was David Laing? than the Rev. Dr. William Robertson, in words addressed to the congregation of New Greyfriars after his death: 'He lived in great measure withdrawn from the eyes of

the world, and owing to his modesty and retiring disposition, few, except those who were themselves walking in the same path of literature, or were interested in its results, were acquainted with the singular talents he displayed in his own department, with the successful labours which he prosecuted, and the untiring zeal almost up to the moment when the sands of his glass were to be counted by grains, or with the singularly voluminous evidence of his genius and his industry which he has left behind him. Widely known beyond the brilliant circle of literary men and archaeologists he was not. It is strange how completely his own retiring habits excluded him from general fame, and it may be that comparatively few even of this congregation were at all aware that the grave, unpretending old gentleman whom they were accustomed to see for long years in his place among them, was unquestionably in his own selected walk the most distinguished man of his generation. . . . He did not work either for money or for fame. . . . Utterly devoid of noisy ambition or love of notoriety, his life was one of singular industry, and honour, and usefulness. . . . Not only his latter end, but his whole life was peace. . . .'

Let me add in the words of the poet,

From his cradle
He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one;
Exceeding wise, fair spoken and persuading;
So excellent in art, and still so rising,
That Christendom shall ever speak his virtue.

DAVID MURRAY.