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The Rise and Fall of the New Edinburgh Theatre Royal, 1767-1859: Archival Documents and Performance History

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In 1859, the Edinburgh house of Wood and Company published a Sketch of the History of the Edinburgh Theatre-Royal in honor of its final performance and closing, its author lamenting that “This House, which has been a scene of amusement to the citizens of Edinburgh for as long as most of them have lived, has at length come to the termination of its own existence” (3). The brief booklet provided the playbill as a frontispiece, recording the full evening’s entertainment that included Tom Taylor’s Masks and Faces,1 a farewell address, William Bayle Bernard’s farce His Last Legs;2

1. Taylor wrote his 1854 sentimental comedy Masks and Faces in collaboration with Charles Reade, with the role of Irish actress Peg Woffington (c.1714-60) probably designed for the actress Mrs. Stirling (British and American Playwrights 4-5).
2. His Last Legs first appeared in 1847.

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W. H. Murray’s national drama *Cramond Brig*, a valedictory sketch, and the national anthem performed by the entire company. It was a long evening to commemorate the theatre building’s ninety years of careworn performance history (*Sketch*, frontispiece).

While the following essay incorporates evidence about the Edinburgh Theatre Royal from early publications, these sources are sketchy; and it takes some effort to combine their narratives to draw a more complete historical conclusion about the theatre’s past. The object of the new research herein is to answer questions about the theatre’s ambitious number of performances, about its religious and political confrontations, about the fiscal issues that impeded its success, about its supporters and actors, and about its reliance on talent from the “south.” The following archival summary is important to the essay’s conclusions as well.

Archival research on the Edinburgh Theatre presents some interesting findings as well as challenges. The National Archives/Public Record Office at Kew contains several boxes of complex material from the Lord Chamberlain’s Offices, the licensing body for English theatres; but none of the information on the Edinburgh Theatre, mixed in among the English theatre items in the LC boxes, is in the LC indexes. One has to sort through the contents of the actual LC boxes, but mostly LC 5/181 and LC 7/4 contain the Edinburgh documents. Judith Milhous and Robert Hume’s “Annotated Guide to the Theatrical Documents in PRO LC 7/1, 7/2 and 7/3” provides help with London theatre items but doesn’t address items in those boxes beyond 7/3.

The National Library of Scotland houses an amazing amount of information on the Edinburgh Theatre, including original playbills in AP 6.213 01 (not yet digitized) that begin with the year 1775. The NLS has a significant amount of published and digital material as well, particularly playbills, scattered between the years 1808 and 1825. The British Library holds substantial early-published work on the theatre, including a *View of the Edinburgh Theatre*’s summer season of 1759 attributed to James Boswell, along with a number of playbills on microfilm. Finally, the Parliamentary Archives hold “An Act for extending the Royalty of the City of Edinburgh

3. Murray’s melodrama *Cramond Brig* was a staple for the Scottish stage, along with *The Heart of Midlothian* and *Guy Mannering* in the early nineteenth century (Dibdin 432).

4. My thanks to Professor Dan Ennis, Coastal Carolina University, for suggesting that I look at this uncatalogued Edinburgh material in the Lord Chamberlain’s files at the National Archives in Kew. This work was funded in part by grants from the East Tennessee State University Research Development Committee Small Grants Program.
over certain adjoining Lands; and for giving Powers to the Magistrates of Edinburgh for the Benefit of the said City; and to enable His Majesty to grant Letters Patent for establishing a Theatre in the City of Edinburgh, or Suburbs thereof, along with a paper on manager John Jackson’s bankruptcy; and Guildhall owns a document on Stephen Kemble’s lease for the theatre property in 1793.

Establishment, Opposition, and Management

According to the National Library of Scotland, the Edinburgh Theatre’s initial performance as the patented theatre was launched in December 1767 as a part of the New Town project which included the establishment of a theatre to be built in Shakespeare Square at the east end of Princes Street (“Playbills”). A Sketch of the History of the Edinburgh Theatre-Royal records that Mr. David Ross, who had earlier managed the small theatre in Canon-gate, “patronized to a moderate extent by such fashionable society as then existed in Edinburgh,” obtained the patent for the theatre; and construction on the new building began in 1768. The house cost Mr. Ross nearly £7,000, and the cornerstone inscription ended thusly:

May this theatre tend to promote every moral and every virtuous principle, and may the representations be ever such as
“To make mankind in conscious virtue bold,
Live o’er each scene, and be what they behold.” (Sketch 4)

James Boswell commemorated the occasion of the new theatre’s first performance, The Earl of Essex, in the refitted Canongate Concert Hall in 1767, before the new building was finished, with the following prologue:

Scotland for learning and for arms renown’d
In ancient annals, is with lustre crown’d,
And still she shares whate’er the world can yield,
Of lettered fame, or glory in the field:
In every distant clime Great Britain knows,
The Thistle springs promiscuous with the Rose.
While in all points with other lands she vied,
The Stage alone to Scotland was denied:

5. This is probably The Earl of Essex, a tragedy in five acts by Henry Jones, first performed in 1753. Jones’ play is a somewhat rationalized version of John Banks’ The Unhappy Favourite: or, The Earl of Essex, a Tragedy (1681), retaining, however, the romance element of the Queen’s ring taken originally from La Calprenède’s Comte d’Essex (1637).
Mistaken zeal, in times of darkness bred,
O’er the best minds its gloomy vapours spread;
Taste and religion were supposed at strife,
And ’twas a sin—to view this glass of life!

....
This night the lov’d George’s free enlight’ned age
Bids Royal favour shield the Scottish stage;
His Royal favour ev’ry bosom cheers;
The Drama now with dignity appears.... (qtd. in Dibdin 493)⁶

The National Library of Scotland digital archives provide pictures of the theatre before and after 1830 (“Playbills”), and later in the theatre’s history a London visitor to Edinburgh described the building as “rather trumpery in its decoration: and a most miserable audience” (Bedfordshire & Luton MS. L 30/18/70/9). NLS digital archives, however, show that the building was modest but rather stately (see figs. 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Theatre Royal, 1830 to 1859. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland.

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⁶ Biographer Frederick A. Pottle reports that Boswell’s prologue appeared in newspapers and magazines of the day and probably received wider circulation than any of his other efforts in verse (Earlier Years 346).
While this was a new theatre building in 1769, it was by no means Edinburgh’s first foray into theatre, for James C. Dibdin records its early history from the 1600s in his *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage*. Bill Findlay’s *A History of Scottish Theatre* also provides a collection of essays from the early history of drama in Scotland through the twentieth century. Findlay’s own essay addresses drama in the Middle Ages; but, as he explains, “the massive loss and destruction of burgh, church, guild and court records, including dramatic properties and texts, is a major obstacle to trying to re-create the forms that Scottish medieval drama took.” While Anna Jean Mill in *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* gathered surviving evidence in 1927, including folk drama, religious drama, a passion play, and Latin tragedies, what we think of as early drama really begins to emerge in Scotland in the Renaissance (Findlay 1). James VI, later James I of England, is of special significance to drama for two reasons, explains Findlay, “his resistance to the Reformers’ antipathy to drama; and the loss of that resistance, with the concomitant loss of royal patronage of drama, with his decision to relocate his Court in London on the Union of the Crowns in 1603.” James wrote poetry and promoted the kind of dramatic entertainments at Court that his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had nurtured in the face of Reformers’ disapproval (Findlay 37-38). James regularly granted licenses to visiting companies of players, but there was not to be a patented theatre building in Scotland for some time.
The eighteenth century, explains Adrienne Scullion, began with erratic and irregular “theatrical entertainments at the Tennis court Theatre, Holyrood, and a handful of plays by Scots being played in London.” In the next few decades the Scottish theatre came into its own as a theatre culture began to emerge. Nonetheless, by “mid-century there were regular clashes between supporters of the theatre and religiously motivated opponents,” but by 1800 there were finally “nine permanent playhouses in Scotland” (Scullion 80), the later patented Theatre Royal in Edinburgh among the most prestigious. “In the twenty years between its establishment in 1747 and the award of the Patent in 1767,” writes Scullion, “control of the Edinburgh playhouse, known as the ‘New Concert Hall’ or the ‘Canongate Theatre’, in Skinner’s Close, passed through a dizzying number of hands” (112).

Although James Boswell (1740-95) would have been a young man when he attended the Canongate Theatre performances, the anonymous View of the Edinburgh Theatre can be attributed to him based on various pieces of evidence, argues David W. Tarbet, including “The dedication to Boswell’s current idol, West Digges,” and the extravagant praise of Mrs. Cowper, Boswell’s current passion” (i-ii). Boswell’s letters and journals show a strong, early interest in the theatre; and “an indirect reference in a 26 September 1759 letter to John Johnston” [one of Boswell’s oldest friends], explains Ralph Walker, “appears to make an amused claim of authorship for the part of the View which had earlier appeared in the June and July numbers of the Edinburgh Chronicle”:

You obliged me not a little with your Theatrical News. I am highly diverted that a certain Mock Hero has now fixed the dramatic Criticisms on a different Author from what he did formerly. You have raised my curiosity by mentioning a Satyrical piece upon the Players. I should take it kind if you would drop a line to any of your Acquaintances who might, if possible, yet pick up a copy of it. (5)

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7. Boswell maintained friendship and still corresponded with Digges after Boswell was in London in 1762, sending him regular copies of The North Briton. See Boswell’s letter to Johnston dated 29 March 1763 in Walker’s Correspondence of James Boswell and John Johnston of Grange (62-63). Robb Lawson writes that West Digges (1720?-86) was essentially the first player of distinction to appear at Jackson’s Shoe Lane theatre; his “Wolsey and Macbeth were his most celebrated parts” (55-56).

8. Editor Frederick Pottle notes that Boswell fell “madly in love” with Mrs. Cowper around 1759, an actress several years his senior, and for a time wanted to marry her, even though she was a Roman Catholic (London Journal 5). See also chapter 5 in Pottle’s James Boswell.

9. The editor’s note explains that “During the summer, a series of critical reviews of the performances at the Canongate theatre had appeared in The Edinburgh Chronicle.” Pottle conjectures that Boswell had some part in their composition.
“Boswell, the adolescent,” Ralph Walker argues, “may well have caught his first glimpse of a world beyond the rather grim and narrow circle of his upbringing in the company of Johnston.” And Johnston probably accompanied him to the theatre, a “questionable resort” in the eyes of Boswell’s mother (xvi-xvii). Edinburgh, explains Pottle, was then a “dirty, evil-smelling, crowded, fantastic city, still very mediaeval ... a city steeped in historic associations which a boy’s lively imagination can turn into romance” (Earlier Years 14). So after his father suddenly demanded that Boswell leave Edinburgh and go to the University of Glasgow, Boswell wrote to his friend Johnston in January 1760 craving theatre news: “I see by the Chronicle, that Theatrical Passions at present run high. Pray be so good as give me a number of particulars, which will afford me some entertainment, when deprived of the exalted pleasures of the Stage” (Walker 8-9).10 “Besides tension over the management of the theatre, and the old prejudice against theatre-going as conducive to immorality,” argues Walker, there was considerable unrest that David Garrick’s farce High Life Below Stairs was to open on 16 January 1760; and on opening night, just after Boswell’s letter to Johnston, there was a riot “in the free gallery reserved for the footmen, who objected to the satirizing of servants” (9).

The theatre, writes Tarbet, was Boswell’s “special enthusiasm,” which maintained itself even in the face of his father’s attempt to send him to Glasgow in 1759 to remove him from “his theatrical and literary companions in Edinburgh” (i-ii). His love of the theatre is well documented in his London Journal of 1762-63, itself containing stage-like dialogue and vivid “stage” descriptions. And in a November 22, 1762, entry, after witnessing Garrick’s London performances in George Farquhar’s The Beaux’ Stratagem (1707) and Garrick’s own farce The Farmer’s Return from London, Boswell recalls that the experience “brought the Canongate full in my head. I was exceedingly well entertained” (Journal 47).11 In April of 1774 he wrote to his and Samuel Johnson’s friend Bennet Langton about his own contribution when the playhouse was new:

When I began this letter, I imagined that two pages would contain it; so I wrote upon the opposite page my Prologue which you desired to have. It was published at the time in Newspapers and Magazines.

10. Walker writes that “Dramatic reviews, by unknown hands, were appearing regularly in The Edinburgh Chronicle. In the issue current when Boswell wrote this letter (5-8 Jan., pp. 385 ff.) a ‘critical review’ praises Digges extravagantly as an actor. The next article in the same issue thoroughly damn[s] him.”

11. See also Pottle’s introduction as well as Boswell’s entries.
It had a good effect when it was spoken, and calmed the very wild opposition to Ross. (Fifer 42)

Theatre manager David Ross (1728-90) finally received the Edinburgh Theatre patent in the face of opposition from many town leaders but with support from Boswell, and his recitation of Boswell’s solicited prologue to *The Earl of Essex* apparently helped calm a somewhat unhappy audience on the December 9, 1767, performance (Fifer 42). Boswell was still boasting of his prologue years later; and when Boswell finally met Samuel Johnson in London, he was introduced into the company of actor/theatre-manager Thomas Sheridan, father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and his wife. As biographer Linda Kelly illustrates, Thomas Sheridan had been particularly successful at Smock Alley in Dublin but subsequently left there in financial ruin. By the time Boswell met him in London, Sheridan was well into his plan to reform education by proposing that schoolboys, formerly trained foremost in the Classics, be trained in English literature and language. While his project did not materialize, Sheridan’s lectures on oratory and elocution were a great success; and Boswell was an ardent admirer, calling Sheridan “my mentor, my Socrates” (Kelly 16-17). This early association with Sheridan intensified Boswell’s love of theatre.

Thus with the help of Boswell and other theatre enthusiasts, Scotland ultimately achieved the opening of the patented Edinburgh Theatre Royal at Canongate in 1769 over cries from the pulpit, but by 1771 the Rev. James Baine’s sermon entitled “The Theatre Licentious and Perverted” openly attacked the theatre’s performance of Samuel Foote’s *The Minor* (1760), a play that was not new to censorship. Matthew Kinservik explains that Foote’s anti-Methodist play, whose epilogue was finally suppressed by the Lord Chamberlain after several performances in London, went beyond the bounds of satire on Methodism when it engaged in personal attacks on the evangelist George Whitefield and his followers. While Foote’s criticism on Methodism, writes Kinservik, was one of thousands at the time, this play aimed particularly at its doctrines of regeneration and salvation by grace. If the Lord Chamberlain was “unsympathetic to Whitefield’s allies and very reluctant to censor *The Minor*,” even he may have seen its representation of real characters and real doctrine as a bit too heretical (89). Although

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12. Adrienne Scullion explains that while the Edinburgh Theatre was already in existence, the award of a patent was elusive but finally awarded to Ross to support architect James Craig’s ambitious plans for the New Town (112). Managers were not always the patent holders; during part of John Jackson’s tenure (c.1788), for example, the patent was actually held by the Duke of Hamilton and Henry Dundas (120).
Whitefield’s own response to *The Minor* was subdued,\(^\text{13}\) the controversy both in London and Scotland offered “an excellent opportunity to assess attitudes toward the stage and its regulation at mid-century” (90).

The outraged Edinburgh minister Baine’s sermon, nonetheless, drew a well-organized response from an anonymous friend of the stage. In his “Letter to James Baine … Occasioned by his SERMON, Intitled The TheatreLicentious and Perverted,” the respondent, amused and disturbed, writes that “Your zeal against *Mr. Foote* and his *Minor* is foreign to, and has not even the remotest connection with the cause or honour of Jesus Christ, about which you affect to be so much concerned,” and goes on to support with scripture his argument against the Rev. Baine’s fears. He finally recalls the Presbytery and Prelacy who have often waged bloody wars against each other as well as against other denominations (NLS ESTC T038170).

*The Minor*, of course, was not the only play or player at the Theatre Royal to be condemned. In 1788, for example, manager Jackson received the following letter protesting his casting for an upcoming performance of Thomas Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d*:

Sir,

If the parts of Jaffeir and Pierre are not differently cast before tomorrow, the Play will not be allowed to go on. It is unpardonable in a Manager, to trust a fellow into a part which he must be sensible he is totally incapable of performing.

The Public.

Jackson did not replace the actors, and on the night of July 9 there was great “hissing” from the audience until they were addressed by actor James Fennell, who was playing the part of Jaffeir. Apparently, the letter writer and his allies wanted Mr. Woods cast as Jaffeir opposite Mrs. Siddons’ Belvidera instead and were adamant that “we as independent judges cannot allow any Player to dictate to us, or force himself upon us.” This squabble between audience and manager went on for some time and so disgusted Fennell that he eventually left Edinburgh to return to the London stage (NLS ESTC T048636).

Further, along with remonstrations from ministers and audiences, the theatre suffered a series of fiscally irresponsible managers and patentees. Initial patent owner David Ross seems to have had two financially unsuccessful seasons at the Theatre Royal, probably because of continued censure

\(^{13}\) Whitefield wrote that “I am now mimicked and burlesqued upon the public stage. All hail such contempt” (qtd. in Kidd 232).
from the Scottish church, and leased the house to the “celebrated Samuel Foote for three years, at five hundred guineas a year.” When Mr. Foote did not finish out his lease, it was taken over by West Digges and John Bland in 1771 (Sketch 4-5). Digges was apparently an even less capable manager, for he issued a document in July of 1777 entitled “Mr. W. Digges’s Proposal to his Creditors” in which he put forth the following agreement to pay

from the first day the Theatre opens in the ensuing winter-session, Five Shillings out of every Pound I earn by my profession in this metropolis, after Thirty-five Pounds are allowed for each night’s customary charge, if there are four plays in the week, or Forty Pounds charge when there are only three plays. I do not mean to compound my debts for five shillings in the pound; but this sum I will continue to pay ... until, by persevering in this mode of payment, or by any other event, my circumstances enable me to discharge by debts in FULL. (NLS L. C. 1268, 135)

Digges continues to address the “unprecedented losses” suffered last season “after Miss Catley’s14 departure and stresses the fact that if any creditor should think his proposals are simply drawn in order for him to continue to appear in his public profession, he is mistaken, for

The anxiety I have suffered since January last, has so affected my mind, that I fear I could not immediately undertake that arduous part of my business. I should stipulate, however, ... that I may be at liberty to superintend the conduct of the Stage at this very busy crisis, as well to shew all possible respect and attention to an Actress of the first estimation and merit, whom I have been happy enough to induce to visit this city, as to fulfill one part ... of the duty I owe the Public, by preserving their Theatre ... from the fatal effects of irregularity and confusion. (NLS L.C. 1268, 135)

Digges was eventually forced to shut the theatre and flee Edinburgh. Bland carried on as manager until 1779, followed by Corri, a musician, Wilson, and Ross again around 1781. Some time in 1781, Ross sold the patent to actor John Jackson (Scullion 118-19). Jackson had performed for several years at Drury Lane and the Haymarket and managed theatres in Dundee,

14. Singer/actor Anne Catley made her first appearance at Vauxhall in 1762 and a few months later at Covent Garden. She appears to have performed mostly in Dublin and London. See the somewhat sketchy memoir *The Life of Miss Anne Catley.*
Aberdeen, and Dumfries, writes Campbell; when he purchased the Edinburgh Theatre in 1781, he also opened a new theatre in Glasgow (v). But, as Donald Campbell contends, theatre in Scotland was in “perpetual crisis,” beginning with Alan Ramsay’s playhouse at Carrubber’s Close in Edinburgh in 1736. Part of this was a result of Robert Walpole’s Theatres Act of 1737, which caused the infamous Porteous Riot in Edinburgh in September of that year, but part was also due to the lack of support for a national theatre (vi-vii).15 Unlike their counterparts in London, Edinburgh audiences were small and “unadventurous,” writes Campbell, and the theatre had to rely on patronage from a small group of wealthy individuals who also wanted to define the role of theatre. Shrewd and inventive as he was, Jackson juggled the resources of his theatres to remain in business for almost twenty years (viii-ix). Under such conditions he provided some stability to the Edinburgh Theatre at the end of the eighteenth century, but he, too, eventually faced debt and defeat. By July 1790, creditors were meeting to assist the Factor in the management of Jackson’s failing estate. They agreed not to interfere in the management of the theatre at that time but to leave its management to Mr. King, comedian, and to approve an evening’s performance on July 21 for the benefit of Mrs. Jackson, “she defraying every expense relative therefor” (National Archives LC 5/181). Actor Stephen Kemble (1758-1822), former manager of the Theatre Royal in Newcastle and brother of Charles and John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, eventually took over the patent and theatre management in 1791 and ran it until the end of the century, but bankruptcy negotiations continued after Jackson’s death in 1806, as his daughter fought to regain the theatre’s patent. According to documents in the National Archives, in July 1807 Jackson’s heirs were required to pay £200 to proprietor David Ross, and the court ultimately awarded the patent to Henry Siddons in 1809 (National Archives LC 7/4).16 This revolving door of managers and patent holders is extremely complicated, and this is only a brief summary; but by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Edinburgh Theatre at last fell into more steady and efficient hands.

The theatre building in Shakespeare Square represented a serious attempt to compete with Haymarket and Drury Lane as well as with the theatre in Dublin. Edinburgh was certainly vying with them all for acting

15. Campbell explains that in 1739 Lord Glenorchy’s bill for a royal patent to establish a theatre in Edinburgh was opposed by the Town Council who argued that the Porteous Riot had been the work of Jacobite agitators; Glenorchy had to withdraw his bill, which stifled any “indigenous development” in the Scottish theatre.

16. These committee proceedings are mostly handwritten and difficult to interpret, with full names of those involved usually missing.
talent. Smock Alley, the first Theatre Royal built in Dublin, closed in 1787 but in its heyday boasted performances by Thomas Sheridan, Peg Woffington, and Garrick. Its more modern reincarnation as the National Theatre (1782-1871) found its roots in Irish playwrights and actors, while the Edinburgh Theatre still strove to attract London actors to fill the house. In June 1760, writes Dibdin, a column appeared in the Edinburgh Chronicle proposing that “criticisms of the theatrical performances were to be printed regularly” in order to engage the public in the theatre’s activities (107). While that may not have happened immediately, Boswell’s View managed to do exactly that while performances were still being staged at the old Canongate Theatre. The early nineteenth-century, however, brought more stability to the Edinburgh Theatre, mostly through the efforts of Sir Walter Scott, Henry Siddons, and William Murray and beginning with Stephen Kemble’s management in 1791.

In 1791, George Stephen Kemble, brother of Sarah Siddons and John Philip Kemble, agreed to partner with Jackson in managing the Edinburgh Theatre but then denied Jackson access. Jackson and his friends retaliated with public attacks in print, but Kemble opened the theatre season alone in 1792 (the year of Jackson’s death) with The Beggar’s Opera, starring John Kemble and Sarah Siddons. Paying off Jackson’s creditors left Kemble little profit, and by 1800 he was done with Edinburgh (DNB 382), eventually leaving the management to Henry Siddons. Henry astutely solicited the support for a successful Scottish theatre from Sir Walter Scott, who turned to Scottish dramatic material, including Joanna Baillie’s highland play The Family Legend, Scott’s adaptation of Lady of the Lake, Isaac Pocock’s operatic drama Rob Roy MacGregor, or, Auld Lang Syne (adapted from Scott’s novel), and melodramas such as Burns’ Tam O’Shanter. These performances were heightened by Scottish music and dress.

When Henry Siddons died in 1815, his widow and her brother, William H. Murray, managed the house. But by 1819 the theatre was again in financial trouble; saving it lay in the hands of Sir Walter Scott once more, accomplished with the production of Rob Roy and followed by more Scott adaptations that included The Bride of Lammermoor, Guy Mannering, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, Ivanhoe, and Red Gauntlet—and Shakespeare was always a staple (“Playbills”). “It is worthy of mention,” explains Lawson, 17. While the early Dublin theatre was supported by the country’s fairly strong economic situation, it would not become truly Irish until the literary renaissance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Morash’s A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000.

18. See also “A statement of facts explanatory of the dispute between J. Jackson and S. Kemble relative to the Theatre Royal of Edinburgh.”
“that up until 1851, [Rob Roy] had been acted about four hundred times at the Theatre Royal.” And it was Rob Roy that was acted in honor of George IV’s visit to Edinburgh in 1822 (144).19 When Mrs. Henry Siddons’ twenty-one year lease expired in 1830, her brother William Murray took the lease for another twenty-one year period, followed by successful London theatre manager R. H. Wyndham. Under Wyndham’s regime, records Lawson, “all the leading members of the profession appeared, including also the Italian operatic stars.” Finally, however, government purchase of the site in 1859 for the creation of a new post office brought about the ultimate end of the structure known as the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh (Lawson 147-49).

Productions, Actors, and Supporters
While the following performance summary of the Edinburgh Royal Theatre is based on original playbills and on published accounts of activities, it is by no means exhaustive. The theatre’s seasons were continuous and varied, and the following accounts of performances are taken from archived documents and, occasionally, from digitized playbills. It does, however, provide an overview of the kinds of plays and actors entertaining the Edinburgh public from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth.

According to Boswell, the first play of the summer season on June 20, 1759, was Thomas Southerne’s 1696 adapted Oroonoko and a new musical entertainment by Moses Mendez, The Chaplet. Mr. Dexter’s performance of Oroonoko, writes Boswell, “gave us no despicable Opinion of his Abilities,” though he seemed better as a hero than as a lover (Boswell 9-10).20 The following Saturday offered Hamlet, again played by Dublin’s Mr. Dexter, followed by Monday’s performance of Farquhar’s Beaux’ Stratagem with Dexter as Archer. A long list of plays continues, along with the young critic’s sometimes perceptive commentary on acting styles and skill. The list confirms that the theatre was clearly attempting variety in its 1759 summer offerings, from Shakespeare to Molière, Farquhar, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and others. Many of these mainpieces were followed by afterpieces. In fact, the playbills are especially replete with advertisements of musical entertainments and afterpieces, an entertainment that would gain influ-

19. Scullion points out that Sir Walter Scott was instrumental in hastening the abolition of the restrictive Patent in 1843, after his death, with his repertoire of adaptations for the Scottish stage (142).

20. This is probably Irish actor Dexter who worked for Garrick in mid-century as well. In his “Introduction” to View, Tarbet notes that when Boswell writes about Dexter, the actor never measures up to the performances of Digges, as Boswell resented the fact that the Edinburgh Theatre management failed to keep Digges in residence.
ence as the long eighteenth century progressed, many of which “signaled that the real action, the real innovation, was to be on the margins” (Ennis and Slagle 24). Afterpieces listed on extant playbills attest to the theatre’s attempt to bring in newly written pieces, often by little-known authors.

When the Edinburgh Theatre Royal opened its new house for the 1769 season in January with Richard Steele’s *The Conscious Lovers*, writes Scullion, the “construction programme was recklessly ambitious” (113). Even as the theatre management passed through different hands, from Ross to Foote to Digges and others, an ambitious and rigorous performance schedule continued. Playbills at the National Library of Scotland from decades of the theatre’s existence reveal an amazing variety of performances and performers. A playbill from 1775 advertises *All in the Wrong*, a 1761 comedy by Arthur Murphy with West Digges as John Restless, followed by afterpiece *Lethe: or Esop in the Shades* (1749), a dramatic one-act satire by Garrick. Appearing two evenings later was *The Merchant of Venice*, with Elizabeth Inchbald as Portia (with afterpiece *Midas*, possibly John Lyly’s 1592 comedy), and two days after that John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* (NLS AP 6.213 01). Even though there are no extant playbills from the 1776 Edinburgh season, Elizabeth Inchbald was apparently playing Jane Shore in June of that year, for an early account in Gertrude Mayer’s *Women of Letters* records that

“As they expected, there was a riot on Mr. Inchbald’s account.” Why they should have “expected” a disturbance, or in what way he had incurred the wrath of the canny Scots, is not explained, but the manifestation must have been serious, for the Inchbalds quitted Edinburgh and spent their unpremeditated holiday in a long-desired visit to France. (11)

According to biographer Annibel Jenkins, Elizabeth and her husband Joseph Inchbald had begun working for Digges in October of 1772, when Elizabeth opened as Cordelia in Glasgow and began performing in the provinces with Joseph. Tired of the difficult travel all over Scotland, she and Joseph moved to the Edinburgh Theatre a few months later, where she continued to perform roles such as Cordelia in *Lear*, Jane Shore in Nicholas Rowe’s *Tragedy of Jane Shore* and Calista in his *The Fair Penitent* (15-26). By 1776 the Inchbalds seem to have been helping Digges manage the theatre, but the occasion of the “riot” mentioned above is unclear. The company was entirely dependent upon audience approval; and James Boaden, editor of Inchbald’s *Memoirs and Familiar Correspondence*, suggests that Mr. Inchbald had “become overconfident and did not show enough respect
for the audience’s wishes” (qtd. in Jenkins 26). The Inchbalds soon left the Edinburgh chapter of their lives behind.

While Walter Scott would become a particularly active participant in the Edinburgh Theatre in the early nineteenth century, his loyalist politics led him there much earlier. Biographer Edgar Johnson reports that in 1794 when Irish medical students, inspired by Napoleon’s driving the British from Toulon (encouragement for their own Irish Republicanism), insulted loyalists in the boxes and hooted at the national anthem, Scott and other young advocates assembled in the pit with cudgels a few nights later, determined to see that “God Save the King” was not interrupted. At the first note, writes Johnson, “the Irish clapped on their hats and brandished their shillelaghs, and a battle broke out” in the theatre. After a few heads had been cracked, the loyalists won, “Scott himself scoring three broken heads” (102).

Although there are few extant playbills and colorful stories like this one from the Edinburgh Theatre’s eighteenth-century history, the National Library’s archives contain an abundance of nineteenth-century playbills that reveal the growing demand for celebrated actors and performances. The earliest of these is from a November 13, 1807, performance of Sheridan’s *Pizarro*, followed by John Wallace’s *Tale of Mystery: a Drama in Two Acts* adapted from Kotzebue’s *Die Spanier in Peru*; *Pizarro* was again performed in 1808 (“Playbills”). The presentation of *Pizarro* to an Edinburgh audience offered innovation and a piece of popular culture straight from the London stage; for, argues Daniel O’Quinn, the fashionable London play demanded a “leap into the future” and pointed “towards developments that would define nineteenth-century theatrical practice” with stunning and ambitious scenery (191).

We know that Sarah Siddons and John Kemble had frequented Edinburgh to perform on their brother Stephen’s stage while he held the patent during the last decade of the eighteenth century. And in 1809 the theatre’s manager, Henry Siddons (1774-1815), attempted to capitalize on the talents of his famous relations as well. Henry Siddons, who had acted at Covent Garden, was encouraged to take over the management of the Edinburgh Theatre by Walter Scott, where they managed to bring Sarah Siddons out of semi-retirement to Edinburgh in 1810. Siddons had played in Edinburgh as early as 1784, reports Lawson (127), and had starred as

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21. Performed by actor Middleton in Edinburgh, the role had been one of Charles Kemble’s most acclaimed in London.

22. See Linda Kelly’s *The Kemble Era* for accounts of when Kemble and Siddons were performing in Edinburgh.
Jane De Montfort in Joanna Baillie’s play at Drury Lane in 1800, so the invitation from her son to return to Edinburgh for Baillie’s *Family Legend* was not to be resisted.

In 1809 Scottish playwright Joanna Baillie, at the insistence of friend Walter Scott, had sent him a copy of her Highland play *The Family Legend: A Tragedy, In Five Acts*. The plot had been handed down to sculptor Anne Damer from her grandmother, and Baillie believed the story well suited for staging the passions of her characters (Slagle 131-38). Baillie had only met Scott in 1806, but their mutual love of Scottish literature and tradition made them fast friends, and she gave him credit for the play’s success at the Edinburgh Theatre. Scott assured her that *Legend* would run nine nights and that she might expect no less than £300-400. Instead, the play, opening on January 28, 1810, ran for three weeks and was followed by her tragedy *De Montfort* on February 20. The successful production *Legend* was the result of a concerted effort: Scott wrote the prologue, Henry Mackenzie supplied the epilogue, manager Henry Siddons worked on staging, and Charlotte Scott brought thirty friends to the premiere. The cast included Henry Siddons and his mother Sarah, but Baillie had been apprehensive of the play’s triumph on stage and sent a letter to Scott on February 4, 1810, that resonated with gratitude:

> You have indeed sent me a loud & hearty cheer from my native land, and I feel it at my heart sensibly & dearly. The applause of the most brilliant London Theatre I could not so feel, and I receive it as a gift from that great hand which has bestowed upon me many blessings for which I must endeavor to be as thankful as I can. (Baillie 250)

Before the *Legend*’s production, several alterations were proposed to its author. While Baillie was grateful to Scott and Mackenzie for all their care, her response to Mackenzie on December 12, 1809, confirmed that she was open to suggestions but not intimidated to make changes that altered her intent:

> I come now to your principal objection, that which regards the character of Maclean. I intended him for a weak, irresolute character, timid in counsel, but professing personal courage & warm affections, and of sufficient ambition to dread losing his power &

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23. See also *The Collected Letters of Joanna Baillie* for multiple entries on *The Family Legend*. All of the material in this section about the performance history comes from these two sources based on archival documents.
state as chieftain, and being entirely deserted by his Clan. This I suppose might have excited interest & pity that would have counterbalanced any contempt we might feel for it; but when such an excellent judge of the human heart as yourself thinks otherwise, it becomes me to be very diffident of my own opinion. I am so; and feel myself a good deal discouraged on this head: but to alter the character of Maclean, connected & incorporated as it is with every thing in the piece, would be to me more difficult than writing an entirely new play; and I must confess, had I time which at present I have not, I want spirits for the task. (1113-14)

As with any play evolving from page to stage, Legend did need modifications, and Baillie trusted Scott more than anyone to accomplish this. Ultimately, her letter to Mackenzie on February 4, 1810, emphasized her gratitude to them both and her love for the Edinburgh Theatre: “I should be a stock & a stone could it be otherwise. I can truly say, and you will believe me, I would not give up the applauses of your Edinburgh audience so heartily bestow’d upon me last monday for all the plaudits of our London Theatres for these ten years to come” (1116).

A January 1810 playbill advertising a production of The Tempest, housed in the National Library of Scotland collections and reprinted in Barbara Bell’s chapter in A History of the Scottish Stage, also announces the upcoming performance of Baillie’s The Family Legend, a “New Tragedy in Five Acts, never published or Acted on any Stage ... With a New Prologue, and Epilogue, Appropriate Scenery, Dresses and Decorations.—The Act Tunes to consist of Scotch Music” (141). The playbill from the actual night of Baillie’s first performance, and for others during the 1810 season, is not in the NLS collections, but those from following years reflect Henry Siddons’ efforts to keep the theatre popular through production choices and concerted efforts with influential figures like Scott. Henry Siddons followed Baillie’s play with an adaptation of Scott’s Lady of the Lake and played Fitzjames himself. The “Scott dramas,” argues Bell, “brought about a sea-change in the fortunes of the Scottish theatre and altered its relationship to the Scottish people, leading to the formation of a nineteenth-century dramatic genre that was Scotland’s own—the ‘National Drama’” (143). But even with these efforts, the Edinburgh Theatre struggled financially.

Continuing to manage the theatre and to write plays,24 in 1811 Henry Siddons again turned to his family for support. While he and his wife

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24. Henry Siddons acted many roles while managing the theatre but was always in the shadow of his more successful relatives the Kembles. He also wrote several plays,
Harriet acted in many of the plays themselves, he continued to call on his mother to draw an audience on special occasions. A March 4 announcement for Benjamin Hoadly’s *The Suspicious Husband* (1747) advertises a cast that again included Sarah Siddons, Robert and Mrs. Strickland, Mrs. Henry Siddons and others; a musical interlude, Dibdin’s *The Recruiting Serjeant*; and an afterpiece entitled *The Blind Boy* followed (NLS AP 6.213 01). An 1811 notice housed in the Victoria and Albert archives, however, records that the theatre was also forced to close for an evening (undated but for the year), stating that “All the Performers Arrived, With the Exception of Mr Berry, Who has Occasioned this Third Disappointment To the Theatre” (V&A S.54-2008). After being let down three times by Mr. Berry (probably John Berry who had left London for the Edinburgh stage), Henry Siddons was clearly annoyed enough to call the actor’s reputation into question. The next few records from the NLS are also from the 1811 season and advertise performances such as Richard Leigh’s comedy *Grieving’s A Folly!!; or, the House of Mourning* in January and Thomas Morton’s *Speed the Plough* in February. The following year in May brought out Vanbrugh’s *The Provok’d Husband*, John Tobin’s *The Honey-Moon*, and a play entitled *The Wonder!* (probably Susanna Centlivre’s early eighteenth-century comedy). *The Heiress of Strathearn; or, the Rash Marriage* appeared in March 1813 to complete what seems to be a series of unconventional plays under Henry Siddons’ management, enhanced by Scottish dances, music, and unusual afterpieces (“Playbills”).

On November 23, 1815, the year of manager Henry Siddons’ death from tuberculosis in Edinburgh, Sarah Siddons returned to the Edinburgh stage. To honor her son and to raise money for the maintenance of her daughter-in-law and grandchildren, Siddons revisited the Theatre Royal including *Tale of Terror; A Dramatic Romance* (1803) and *Time’s a Tell-Tale: A Comedy in Five Acts* (1807).

25. *The Blind Boy* was a two-act melodrama by James Kenney. Anecdotes about Sarah Siddons’ performances recorded in the *Sketch of the History of the Edinburgh Theatre-Royal* imply that the Scots were a difficult audience to please, and Siddons was often left exhausted after performances. In one instance, the author explains, “she told me she coiled up all her powers to the most emphatic possible utterance of one passage, having previously vowed in her heart that if this could not touch the Scotch, she would never again cross the Tweed” (*Sketch* 7). The audience eventually warmed to her, flocking to her performances in order to improve their own elocution (8).

26. John Berry (d. 1821) acted at the Haymarket Theatre and played Glevalvon in *Douglas*. He left London and settled in Edinburgh around 1803 and acted there at least through the 1815-16 season (*Biographical Dictionary of Actors* 65).

27. I have been unable to identify *The Heiress of Strathearn.*
to play the role of Queen Katharine for ten nights in *Henry VIII*. She had performed this role as early as 1788 but, ambivalent about another performance, wrote to her friend James Ballantyne in Scotland on 22 October 1815 that

> I hope my visit to Edinburgh will be beneficial to my dear son's family. At least it will evince the greatest proof of respect for that public on whom they depend, which it is in my power to give. I have some doubts whether the motives which induce me to return to the public after so long an absence will shield me from the darts of malignity, and when I think of what I have undertaken I own myself doubtful and weak with respect to the performance of the task I am called on to make. (qtd. in Manvell 306)

This performance constituted the end of an era for the Siddons/Kemble performers and a new era for the Keans. As William Hazlitt lamented in *The Examiner* in October 1816, “We wish we had never seen Mr Kean ... He has destroyed the Kemble religion; and it is the religion in which we were brought up” (qtd. in Kelly 13).

The 1819 season brought Edmund Kean (~1787-1833) to the Edinburgh Theatre for a variety of performances. Having proved his talents at Drury Lane a few years earlier, Kean gave London audiences a new style to replace that of the aging John Philip Kemble. Known for his fighting prowess onstage and off, explains Jeffrey Kahan, the elder Kean “flouted widely understood cultural and physical boundaries, and his career would be measured,” not for his acting alone, but for “his ability to knockout his theatrical rivals” (17).28 By 1817 his physical excess onstage, along with his drinking and sexual exploits off, was wearing heavily on him; and by the age of 33, writes Kahan, he was already seen as an old man as his popularity as actor and theatre manager was fading (24-25). This may have well been the reason for Kean’s venture onto the Edinburgh stage in 1819 in such dramas as Philip Massinger’s comedy *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (April 10 and September 30), R. C. Maturin’s *Bertram* (April 12), Ambrose Phillips’ *The Distress’d Mother* (April 15), Macbeth in his signature titular role (October 1), an adaptation of Jean Racine’s *Alexander the Great* (October 4), and Sheffield’s *The Tragedy of Brutus* (October 5) (NLS

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28. Early biographer Harold Newcomb Hillebrand also writes that Kean was performing in Edinburgh on other occasions during the decade, but I have not located playbills for evidence (173).
AP 6.213 01 April and October 1819). These were exhausting roles, requiring not only emotional excess, but also stage fighting and other feats of strength. A variety of afterpieces followed performances during this season, including Walley Chamberlain’s farce *The Sleep-Walker; or, Which is the Lady?*, Isaac Pocock’s dramatic opera *For England, Ho!*, and a musical piece entitled “Spanish Bolero.” Kean’s last Edinburgh performance for 1819 would again be in *The Distress’d Mother*, alongside Harriet Siddons (NLS AP 6.213.01 April & November 1819). Sometime in the autumn of 1819, reports Hillebrand, friends in Edinburgh presented Kean with a sword for his brilliant portrayal of Macbeth, “expressing a desire that he should wear it when he appeared in that tragedy as the crowned King of Scotland” (190).

However, it may have been good for Kean’s career, argues Kahan, that London audiences missed him for a few months during the 1819 season while rival William Macready wowed audiences there, for Kean’s health was failing. But Kean came again to the Edinburgh stage in July 1820, just before his first American tour, and in April of 1827 for three-night engagements in *Bertram*, a performance he had premiered much earlier at Drury Lane. By now Kean’s career, mostly because of alcoholism and poor health, was coming to a close; although *The Scotsman* reported “no falling off in his vigor” (Hillebrand 303).

Continuing under Harriet Siddons’ management, the years of 1822 and 1823 opened more traditionally, with *Twelfth Night* as the mainpiece and Garrick’s *High Life Below the Stairs* as the afterpiece in January 1822, the farce that had caused riots in 1760. *Rob Roy* opened in January 1823 with Calcraft and Charles Mackay, followed by Pierce Egan’s *Life in London, or, the Adventures of Tom, Jerry, and Logic in their pursuits through life in and out of London* (NLS AP 6.213.01 January 1822 and 1823). The 1825 season seems filled with a return to standard fare, including *Rob Roy*, *MacGregor*, *A Winter’s Tale*, *Pizarro*, *Macbeth*, and *Guy Mannering*. While these offerings are not especially noteworthy, March 1826 brought Sarah Siddons’ brother Charles Kemble to Edinburgh for a run in George Colman’s eighteenth-century comedy *The Jealous Wife*. Linda Kelly notes that

29. John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, essentially altered and divided Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* into two plays, the second being *The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus* (1722).

30. Kahan notes that by 1820 Kean was clearly infected with syphilis and possibly suffering from memory loss (83).

31. The playbill notes that *Life in London* was appearing for the seventeenth time. This is probably J. W. Calcraft, who was managing the Dublin Theatre Royal by mid-century.
Charles Kemble was “less powerful than his brother in tragedy, but infinitely superior in comedy,” so this was a role in which he could shine (Kelly 181). An NLS playbill from 1828 boasts another performance of Othello, with Harriet Siddons, and a “popular” one-act farce by John Howard Payne entitled “Twas I!” (NLS AP 6.213.01 1826 and 1828).

Two playbills from 1829 show the Edinburgh Theatre’s partial turn to opera under the management of Siddons and Murray, with the Italian Company performing Rossini’s La Gazza Ladra, or The Thieving Magpie in early January, followed by Arthur Murphy’s two-act farce Three Weeks after Marriage and Weber’s Romantic opera Der Freischutz in October with Mr. Braham as Rodolph and Miss Phillips as Agnes. A June 1832 playbill advertises Sheridan’s The Rivals, with Charles Mackay as Sir Anthony Absolute, and a new afterpiece by Douglas William Jerrold entitled The Rent Day (NLS AP 6.213.01 1829 and 1832). Barbara Bell argues that when Murray took over the management of the theatre from Harriet Siddons his main failing was his uneasy relationship with playwrights, “which kept the Theatre Royal short of new material. It also meant that Scotland’s ‘National Theatre’ provided no kind of refuge or proving ground for native playwriting talent” (166). This created a constant strain between the theatre and the country’s own capable writers. Meanwhile, the creation of the Edinburgh Theatrical Fund for ill or impoverished actors held its first dinner in February 1827 with Scott presiding. Not in good health, however, Scott found it difficult to contribute new material to the Edinburgh Theatre; but in 1829 Murray did produce a version of Scott’s House of Aspen. Scott called it a “rickety performance,” quite unfit for the stage (Johnson 1118). And Scott’s daughter Anne reports catching cold attending a play a few months later in the “half-empty Edinburgh Theatre” (1122), a bad omen for the theatre’s future.

Nevertheless, in April 1834 Charles Kean, “Son of the Late Lamented Tragedian,” came to the Theatre Royal to perform Othello—a play in which he had performed with his father—this time as the lead (NLS AP 6.213 01 April 3, 1834). The evening included Mr. Stuart as Iago, Mrs. Balls as Desdemona, concluded by W. H. Murray’s afterpiece entitled Gilderoy; The Defeat of the Parliamentary Forces by Gilderoy and His Highlanders. Charles Kean, writes Hardwick, received the handsome sum of £1,200 for “one month in Edinburgh, a city he regarded with affection for the rest of his life” (7). Kean apparently returned to the Edinburgh Theatre in 1842, for in a February 5 letter to a Mr. Buchanan announcing his marriage to Ellen Tree, he writes that “I should wish you to express a hope that we should act together at my approaching engagement in Edinburgh, & also say that you understand it has been a long attachment” (Carson 53).
Unfortunately, there are no extant playbills in the National Library of Scotland archives after 1834; but, since Charles Kean was playing there as late as 1842, one might assume that the Edinburgh Theatre Royal continued to be at least somewhat successful, especially under the management of Wyndham, until its closure in 1859.

Conclusion
While every eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre can claim its own tumultuous history, it seems that the Edinburgh Theatre Royal had more than its share of strife. Its early years, even with the help of Boswell and friends, posed the dilemma of a limited audience who required a great variety of productions and the consequential strain on acting talent and budget. The theatre’s greatest success was probably under the management of the Kemble/Siddons family, but even in their gilded management and acting arena the theatre struggled financially. Although the Scots could claim substantial talent in women playwrights such as Lady Eglantine Maxwell and Joanna Baillie, their theatres were too “weak, fragmented and anglicised,” argues Barbara Bell, “to offer any kind of future to a native talent” (139). Continually looking to the south for genius, the Edinburgh Theatre was, somewhat for political reasons, too often simply a satellite of the London theatres. And while the early Edinburgh Theatre sometimes presented Scottish fare, it leaned toward plays with famous, or sometimes stereotypical, Scottish characters—Macbeth, Douglas, Wallace—not necessarily those created by Scottish authors. It was Walter Scott, however, who brought thousands of people to the Edinburgh Theatre, not only with adaptations of his own novels, but also with fresh plays such as Baillie’s Family Legend. Like Irish theatre, Scottish theatre only began to thrive when it embraced its own literary heritage and culture, but by that time the Edinburgh Theatre Royal was closing its doors.

32. Certainly, even Covent Garden and Drury Lane had their financial problems, and many actors—including the famous Kemble/Siddons family—often went unpaid for their work.

33. Bell also argues that Scottish theatre mostly repeated English dramatic fare, as the Lord Chamberlain’s office often censored “national” material in fear of Jacobite sympathies. Once censorship was “relaxed,” explains Bell, there was a greater choice of Scottish material for the theatre; during twenty evenings in autumn of 1830, for example, the Glasgow company performed 20 different National dramas or plays with Scottish connections (147).
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