

BRIEF NOTES  
ON THE ORIGINS OF  
T. & A. CONSTABLE LTD

\*

EDINBURGH

1937

ABOUT the year 1760 David Willison set up a printing business in Craig's Close. The place which he chose for his office was situated within a few yards of the High Street, which runs from Edinburgh Castle to the palace of Holyroodhouse. With the exception of Scotland's first printers, Chepman and Millar, who set up a press in 1508 in the parallel street of Southgait (or Cowgate), practically every printer in Edinburgh up to this time had had his place of business, his bookselling stall, or his house in one of the closes which opened out of the High Street, or perhaps in the High Street itself.

Craig's Close lay on the north side of the street almost opposite the Mercat Cross, but owing to the building of Cockburn Street and the extension of the City Chambers no trace now remains, though a plate on the wall marks the site of the entrance. At the head of this close Andro Hart, who in 1610 printed the second edition of the Bible printed in Scotland, had his house, while further down the close was his printing office. James Watson, who wrote a History of Printing in Scotland in 1713, also carried on printing here. It was Watson who fought a strenuous campaign against Mrs. Andrew Anderson, who claimed a monopoly of printing in Scotland (1676-1712), and it was the success of Watson's endeavours which established the right of any printer to set up a press.

Andro Hart's dwelling-house was later occupied by William Creech, a bookseller, who was Lord Provost

of Edinburgh in 1811-1813, and afterwards by Archibald Constable.

In 1788 Archibald Constable came to Edinburgh and was apprenticed to Peter Hill, a bookseller. In 1795 Archibald Constable married a daughter of David Willison, and set up on his own account as a bookseller. Willison by this time had an established printing business and was a Bailie of the city of Edinburgh. It is natural that as Archibald Constable enlarged his business he employed Willison to print his book catalogues, and as he began to develop the publishing side of his business many of his books were printed in Craig's Close.

About this time Constable was associated with Walter Scott. Owing to the latter's friendship with James Ballantyne, who was the printer of a local newspaper in Kelso, Constable began to employ Ballantyne as a printer. At first Ballantyne was ignorant of book printing, and on 21st June 1801, referring to Sir Tristrem, he writes to Constable: 'I really am entirely at a loss what to charge as the total expense, because it is the first work I have ever been engaged in. But I am willing to be regulated, in that respect, by your friend, Mr. Willison, or any other respectable printer.'

On 25th January 1802 he again writes: 'The Minstrelsy of the Border is now finished; but I am altogether at a loss how to charge the printing. Though I acknowledge my ignorance *to you*, I should not like to do so to Caddell [*sic*] and Davies, who are strangers to me. May I, therefore, request you will ask your father-in-law, Mr. Willison, what it is customary to charge in Edinburgh, for a sheet of Demy Octavo, Long primer letter, printed in the best style, 800 copies. Or rather,

will you be good enough to show him the annexed note of real outlay, and then he will be enabled to say what ought to be the profit upon it.'

In 1802 the *Edinburgh Review* was launched. The object was to have an independent review divorced from the control of party politics or an individual bookseller. It was initiated by a group (among whom Lord Jeffrey and Sydney Smith were prominent) who held their meetings in Willison's office, in which the review was printed, while the publisher was Archibald Constable.

About this time Ballantyne removed from Kelso to Edinburgh, and shortly afterwards Walter Scott became financially interested in the firm of Ballantyne. The succeeding years were a very glorious time in the history of literary Edinburgh. Archibald Constable gathered a brilliant company of authors, and published not only the *Waverley Novels* but many other books, including the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Some were published on his own account and some in collaboration with London publishers. In this prosperity Willison shared, though he did not enter into the complicated financial arrangements between Scott, Constable and Ballantyne. The catastrophe of 1826, which caused the failure of the three partners, did not involve the Willison firm, though about this time David Willison died and the business was carried on by his heirs.

In 1833 Thomas Constable, a son of Archibald Constable and grandson of David Willison, took over the printing business and moved to 11 Thistle Street in the New Town of Edinburgh. At the same time he dropped the name of Willison and adopted his own name. The present company of T. & A. Constable Ltd. does not

possess the books of the firm before the change of name, but the first entry in the ledger under the name of Thomas Constable appears on 1st February 1833, and consists of an item of four shillings for 60 concert plans. At first the majority of the work done consisted of small circulars and legal work as well as work for learned societies, but bookwork appears at an early date. In February 1834 he printed an edition of 1500 copies of volume 13 of the Waverley Novels for Robert Cadell, Archibald Constable's partner, who was at this time the publisher of Scott's novels. This volume was followed by many others from the same publisher. In March 1834 was printed by Thomas Constable the first book for Adam & Charles Black, for whom Constable printed regularly at that time.

A valuation of the stock taken in 1835 shows that at this time Constable had a fount of Greek and four presses, but by 1852 he had added Arabic, Hebrew, Coptic, Sanskrit, German and Music, while he then used sixteen presses as well as a cylinder and three platen machines. Of these presses three are at present in the possession of T. & A. Constable Ltd. A Stanhope press, believed to have belonged to Willison, is in the entrance hall of the office in 9 Thistle Street, and two Columbian presses, dated 1833 and 1834, are in the company's possession at Hopetoun Street.

In 1839 Thomas Constable was appointed Her Majesty's Printer and Publisher in Edinburgh, on account of his father's services to literature. Before this date this privilege had included the monopoly of printing the Bible in Scotland, but on the expiry of the grant to Sir D. Hunter Blair and J. Bruce, this monopoly was

granted to a Board presided over by the Lord Advocate, and Thomas Constable's privilege was limited to the printing and publishing of Acts of Parliament, Edicts, Proclamations and other papers.

In 1845 the printing employers in Edinburgh were in conflict with the journeymen printers regarding the recognition of the National Typographical Association as a Trade Union. As a result of this the Edinburgh Association of Master Printers was formed, in which Thomas Constable took a prominent part. Among his papers for this period is one which reads:—

' Respected Sir,

We the Undersigned, in thus taking the liberty of submitting this our Petition to you, can only crave for it your favourable reception. Respected Sir, the subject of our Petition is for the better regulation of the Hours of Employment. Those which we have at present deprive us from having any time whatsoever for Mutual Improvement or Instruction. The objection may be brought forward " You have the morning for improving yourselves "; but in the morning there are no schools or lecture-rooms open. So, that, with regard to instruction in the morning, may be said to be of little avail; whereas, Respected Sir, were this Petition to meet with your approval, and we were granted a change of hours,—say from seven till seven, and, on Saturdays, from seven till three, We would have ample opportunity for improving ourselves both physically and Morally.

Awaiting your kind Answer,

We remain,

Respected Sir,

Your humble servants.'

Before 1853 a great proportion of the work, as is shown by the excise book, consisted of Bible printing. At this time a duty was payable on every ream of paper, and the present company holds a label showing the excise stamp.

In this year also the firm extended its field of activities. In common with the other Scottish printers the work undertaken was local in origin, but in 1853 Thomas Constable entered the London market and began to print books for London publishers. In this step he was soon followed by other Edinburgh printers.

In 1859 Thomas Constable was appointed Printer to the University of Edinburgh, and at his death on the application of his son for confirmation it was stated that the appointment was given to the firm of Messrs. Constable and not limited to the senior partner.

In addition to printing under the name of Thomas Constable he undertook publishing under the name of Thomas Constable & Co., and in both these firms he was associated with James Gordon. In 1860 this partnership was dissolved, and Constable undertook the whole work himself with the exception of a series of books under the title of Constable's Educational Series, which Gordon thereafter published.

In 1861, from a Memorial submitted to the Master Printers of Edinburgh by the journeymen compositors, we find that Thomas Constable was employing fifty compositors, a greater number than in any other office in Edinburgh at that date. At this period the firm had close financial connections with the papermaking firm of Alexander Cowan of Penicuik, whose partners were related to Constable.

By 1869 Thomas Constable had assumed his son

Archibald as a partner, and in that year a warrant was issued associating him with his father as Her Majesty's Printer in Edinburgh, an appointment which he held till his death in 1915. In 1890 by an Order in Council it was decided that while reserving the rights and privileges of existing licensees no future licence should be granted, and so the position has now been allowed to lapse.

In 1878 another partner was assumed when Walter Biggar Blaikie, a Civil Engineer who had just returned from India, entered the firm, which retained the name of T. & A. Constable. This arrangement, however, did not continue for many years, for in May 1881 Thomas Constable died and the business was carried on by the two surviving partners.

Within the next twenty years there was a great development in the typography of the firm. The partners were dissatisfied with the types then available, and on exploring the possibilities of improvement they discovered a fount of type which had been cut in 1808 by Miller & Richard, the Edinburgh typefounders. For some reason the possibilities of this type had not been realised, and the sales had been slight. The firm of T. & A. Constable were granted for a period of years the exclusive right to this type, and the first books to be printed in it were the Works of John Dryden, with notes, and a life of the author by Sir Walter Scott, edited by George Saintsbury. As a result of this the type was known as Dryden, and other books printed in this fount were the Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson, Carmina Gadelica, and the Edinburgh Folio Shakespeare. Of these the Edinburgh Edition of Stevenson was probably the most famous, and in addition to the limited edition of 1035

copies a private edition of four copies was printed on Japanese vellum for presentation by the author. Each of these copies bore a printed motto, and one presented to W. B. Laikie bore the motto 'E typis tuis.' W. B. Laikie was not only a relative of R. L. Stevenson, but his nurse as a child, Alison Cunningham, later became the nurse of Stevenson, the 'Cummy' to whom he dedicated his poems. As a result of this connection the firm of T. & A. Constable printed many of Stevenson's works.

At a later date the Dryden type was cut by the Lanston Monotype Corporation, under the name of Scotch Roman (Old Face), in the series No. 46, and later and more successfully in the series No. 137.

Another private fount of type was obtained for a complete edition of the works of George Meredith, which was printed for the London publishing firm of Archibald Constable & Co.—with whom the firm has always had most cordial relations, but with whom in spite of the similarity in name the connection has never been closer than that normally obtaining between a publisher and a printer. The type for this edition of Meredith was specially imported from Italy, and the arrangements taken to secure the secrecy of its origin (by shipping it to Holland, Germany and France before despatching it to Edinburgh) were so complex that when a further supply was required it was found impossible to trace the original typefounder from whom it had been ordered. At a later date, however, the original invoice was discovered. It was a rule that none of this type should be allowed outside the printing office, and if, as occasionally was the case, some other printer wished to make use of it, an electrotype and not the original type was supplied.

Other books of importance which were printed during this period included the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels and the Tudor Translations. An elaborate volume, Quasi Cursores, was printed and presented to the University of Edinburgh on the occasion of its Tercentenary in 1884. This consisted of etchings of the professors by William Hole, together with descriptive letterpress. In addition, Family Histories and Library Catalogues (a class of work in which the firm has always specialised) were undertaken. The publication of volumes for the Scottish History Society (for which the partners of the firm edited three volumes) and the Old Edinburgh Club was also commenced during this period. Both of these series are still being regularly printed.

In 1888 a new literary venture was undertaken by W. B. Laikie and R. Fitzroy Bell when they founded the *Scots Observer*. The services of W. E. Henley were obtained as editor, and he gathered an impressive list of contributors. Among these were James Barrie, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, Andrew Lang, H. G. Wells, and Charles Whibley.

The care which was taken over every detail of production, particularly in the preparation of the title-pages, sought comparison with the work being done at the same time in England by William Morris. The latter, in the choice of his types and the design of his page, aimed at producing a beautiful book, of which the essential was the *appearance*, while the first consideration of the books issued from Thistle Street was *legibility*, bearing in mind the fitness for their purpose.

About this time the business was so expanding that

the premises in Thistle Street were becoming overcrowded, and plans were drawn up for an amalgamation with Messrs. Ballantyne, Hanson & Co. A new factory, to be erected in Edinburgh, was designed, but the scheme never matured. Robert Kilpatrick, a son-in-law of W. B. Blaikie, was assumed as partner, and by 1912 a new factory was obtained, running in conjunction with the Thistle Street works. But very soon afterwards the war broke out, and the new factory at Granton was taken over by the Admiralty.

In 1921 a Limited Company was formed under the name of T. & A. Constable Ltd. In addition to the existing partners, Edward Boyd, C.A., S. C. Freeman and W. M. Todd became Directors.

The pressure of work proved that the premises in Thistle Street were quite inadequate, and after examining a variety of sites ground was obtained in 1929 at Hope-toun Street, Edinburgh. A new factory was erected on this site on the most modern lines. Consisting of one storey it was designed to allow easy and rapid production under ideal conditions. Great care was given to the lighting, both natural and artificial, and the large airy departments provide for the comfort of the employees. Although the majority of the employees reside at no great distance from the works, a Mess-room controlled by a Works Committee is provided.

W. B. Blaikie, the first Chairman of the company, died in 1928, and his grandson, P. J. W. Kilpatrick, was appointed a Director in 1930.

The chief tendency in recent years has been the increasing amount of educational work which has been undertaken. The facilities for printing in foreign

languages and the staff of specialist readers required for the printing of work for the University have been available for the extension of this side of the company's activities, while the variety of founts of type made available by the Monotype machine is extensively employed in the production of biographies and other general books of the highest quality. Among the authors whose work has been printed by the company are Sir James Barrie, John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir), Norman Douglas, Aldous Huxley, Rudyard Kipling, George Moore, T. F. Powys, and Oscar Wilde.

A class of work which is extensively carried out is legal, insurance, and company printing. In addition to educational work, the company has specialised in work for schools, particularly in the compilation of School Registers for Edinburgh Academy, Fettes College, Glenalmond, Loretto School, and Tonbridge School.

In 1932 arrangements were made by which the company undertook the printing, including *Chambers's Journal*, for Messrs. W. & R. Chambers Ltd., who, after more than a hundred years in the High Street (near Craig's Close, where Willison set up his press), removed and gave up their printing department. Similar arrangements were made at the same time with McDougall's Educational Company.

By 1936, within a period of seven months, the company, by death, lost two successive Chairmen, R. Kilpatrick and S. C. Freeman. On 1st July of that year the business of the Edinburgh Press was incorporated, the name of the company continuing as T. & A. Constable Ltd.

The Edinburgh Press was founded in 1876 by Andrew Francis Murray at 9-11 Young Street, Edinburgh. At first the work was mainly for legal firms, but towards the end of the century bookwork was undertaken for London publishers. In 1908 his nephew, Edward Murray, was assumed as partner, and thereafter was in control of the firm. In 1906 the firm had printed the First Series of the Letters of Queen Victoria. As a result of this they received the recognition of Printers to His Majesty at Edinburgh by Appointment. In 1911 it was decided to rebuild the premises in Young Street, but when one-half of the work was performed the war broke out and the work was never completed.

In 1916 the business passed into the hands of J. C. W. Barrett. The bookwork side of the business was increased and the jobbing side developed. In 1930 his son, J. H. Barrett, entered the firm, and in 1933 opened a London office to establish closer relations with publishers, as the firm's work in this direction was steadily increasing.

The Edinburgh Press have printed the major portion of the Tusitala Edition of the works of R. L. Stevenson, together with the whole of the Skerryvore and Lothian Editions of the same author's works. Other authors whose works have been printed include John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir), Sir Austen Chamberlain, and Viscount Snowden.

The facilities in Edinburgh for the training of apprentices are probably the best in the British Isles. Every boy before being allowed to start his seven years' apprenticeship is tested by educational and medical examinations,

and in addition psychological tests are applied. By this means only the very best boys are able to enter the service of the company, and by such precautions the continuance is assured of the skill and craftsmanship for which the works have always been famous.

The policy of the company will remain what it has always been in the past—to produce work of the very highest quality, particularly where good reading and printing are of the greatest importance.





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