

THE BOOK  
OF THE  
OLD EDINBURGH  
CLUB

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The Journal for  
Edinburgh History



This article is extracted from **The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club, The Journal for Edinburgh History** ISSN 2634-2618

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'OUR SMALL WORLD OF FASHION'; OR, THE DARK SIDE OF THE BALL

IAIN GORDON BROWN

JOHN HENDERSON'S *Assembly Rooms* in George Street lie at the very heart of the First New Town, and since their construction between 1782 and 1787 they have remained the centre of Edinburgh civic life. Along with the adjoining Music Hall of later date they now host a variety of cultural, commercial and social events. There, in the 'Golden Age' of the city, the smartest balls and assemblies were held — as still they are. There Society with all its foibles, snobberies and petty distinctions could best be observed — as still, on occasion, it can. The frissons and social eddies wittily commented upon earlier in the eighteenth century by the poet William Hamilton of Bangour, and formerly played out in other venues, there found their true scene of action: the feline rivalries; the false friendships; the cuttings and put-downs of upper-class young women among each other and especially against competitors for beaux or for worldly attention, or directed against those considered of lesser status.

In the early nineteenth century Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus would speak of Edinburgh society on display at the Assembly Rooms and at private routs, balls (some lasting till nearly day-break) and card-and conversation-parties as her 'career of dissipation' in 'our small world of fashion'. If not conscious of her looks and their effect, she was never unaware of her status as a Highland laird's daughter, and she wrote of her immature self and of her peers as scornful and disdainful rejectors of suitors whom they considered (then) not good enough but merely as unavoidable and ephemeral dance partners.<sup>1</sup> Slightly later, Helen Graham, when writing of the celebrated Bachelors' Ball, sidestepped the bachelors themselves to concentrate on the manners and attitudes of the ladies old and young who hung upon such events, alluding amusingly as she did so to the 'rivalships, backbitings, envy and malice' of the upper-middle and higher ranks of Edinburgh society.<sup>2</sup> This was the world in which moved Jessy Allan

(Harden) and Susan Mein (Sibbald). Their diaries and memoirs bring it to life, and offer a commentary on the etiquette, the dance steps, the fashions, the millinery and even the cosmetics that helped it revolve in its elegant orbit.<sup>3</sup>

The architecture of the Assembly Rooms drew little praise, though its interior arrangements and decoration were more appreciated. But the building was merely a container for the activities that took place within its austere neo-classical walls and beneath its lofty plastered ceilings and splendid chandeliers. The perceptive commentator Alexander Campbell, a musician, observed that the building reflected the society that had commissioned it: it was 'fitted up in a style of magnificence characteristic of the advanced state of society in the Scottish [sic] capital.' He waxed lyrical, seduced by the refracted and reflected light of all those lustres: 'and when beauty appears amid this splendour, decked out in all the elegance of taste and fashion, skimming lightly along through the mazes of a minuet, heightened by the rising glow imparted by the graceful movements of the more lively dance; insensible must that heart be which feels not the influence of female charms, while beholding a select party of Scottish [sic] ladies on the night of an assembly. On the night of a *card-party*, the scene is changed. On *concert-nights* the company is neither so select nor so brilliant as on ball-nights.'<sup>4</sup>

The visiting English barrister and experienced European traveller Sir John Carr attended an Assembly Rooms ball and noted (as still today one may, for instance at the annual Subscription or New Club Balls) how 'many beautiful women adorned the festive scene; and they, as well as the men, exhibited much skill and grace in dancing, particularly in Scottish dances, to which they are very partial. The national gravity of countenance was however visible, and particularly amongst the young men.'<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the beaux knew that they were soon to be discarded

by the girls, who would shortly turn on each other with tongue if not with claw.

Brief as it is, an amusing document, recently acquired by the National Library of Scotland, stands as antidote to the contemporary adulation of the Rooms and their denizens.<sup>6</sup> Entitled simply 'Advertisement' and dated 1802, the manuscript verse bears a note to the effect that it was designed 'To be put upon the Doors of the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh'. This anonymous *jeu d'esprit* needs no commentary, but its whimsical and cynical tone will be appreciated by those who are familiar with the diaries and published memoirs of the period, and

with their descriptions of manners and modes. A transcript appears below:

None can be admitted, take notice ye Fair;  
Whose Cheeks are not *rouged*, & whose necks are not *bare*.  
With Petticoats shortened, & as for the number,  
Even *two* are thought shocking & absolute lumber.  
Your Heads must be razored, for none now but Prigs  
Wear old-fashioned ringlets; the rage is for wigs.  
And if in your nature, you have much forbearance,  
Exactly at One, you must make your appearance;  
Push on through the Crowd, with a boldness and grace,  
The Dancers despise, & the Rules of the Place,  
Criticise all around, think the whole is a bore,  
Then retire to your Rooms, quite disgusted, at Four.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus, *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, edited by Andrew Tod, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1988), II, pp. 8–10.
- 2 *Parties and Pleasures: The Diaries of Helen Graham*, edited by James Irvine (Edinburgh 1957), p. 55.
- 3 William Park, 'Extracts from the Journal of Jessy Allan, Wife of John Harden, 1801–1811'. *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 30 (1959), pp. 60–118; Iain G. Brown, *Elegance and Entertainment in the New Town of Edinburgh: The Harden*

- Drawings* (Edinburgh 1995); *The Memoirs of Susan Sibbald (1783–1812)*, edited by Francis Paget Hett (London 1926).
- 4 Alexander Campbell, *A Journey from Edinburgh through Parts of North Britain ... interspersed with Anecdotes ... together with Biographical Sketches*, 2 vols (London 1802), II, p. 181.
- 5 Sir John Carr, *Caledonian Sketches, or a Tour through Scotland in 1807* (London 1809), p. 196.
- 6 National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11299.