

EDINBURGH HISTORIC WALKS



A SUMMARY OF HIDDEN HISTORIES

KATIE GRIEVE AND KATHERINE SCOTT

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ABOUT EDINBURGH HISTORIC WALKS

Edinburgh Historic Walks was a student-staff partnership project, funded by the Institute for Academic Development. The project ran from November 2024 until June 2025, and facilitated monthly walks around Edinburgh for University staff and students.

The aim of the project was to develop a stronger community between staff and students, by combining physical activity with education and engagement. At the same time, the project highlighted often overlooked

stories from Edinburgh's rich history, focussing on individuals from marginalised and underrepresented communities.

The walks were devised by history student Katherine Scott, and Data and Equality Officer Katie Grieve, with each installment showcasing a different historical theme and location. This booklet was commissioned by the Information Services Group, and contains the histories researched as part of the project.

WOMEN IN STEM

Old Medical School

Elsie Inglis was a Scottish doctor, surgeon and suffragist who qualified at the University of Edinburgh. She started her studies at a college opened by physician Sophia Jex-Blake, before opening her own competing school due to disapproval of Jex-Blake's teaching methods. During her time in Edinburgh, Elsie lived with fellow doctor and suffragette Flora Murray, and it is suspected theirs was a romantic relationship.

During WWI, Inglis was rejected by the British War Office and told to "go home and sit still" when she offered them ready-made medical units staffed by trained women. Undeterred, she raised the equivalent of £53 million in today's money to send 14 medical teams across Europe. She travelled to Serbia with one of her teams where she was captured and held prisoner, and subsequently

repatriated through neutral Switzerland. Inglis later became the first woman to be awarded the Serbian Order of the White Eagle. She only left war-torn Europe and returned to the UK when her health forced her to, and died from cancer in 1917, one day after arriving in Britain.



Dr Elsie Inglis plaque, Old Medical School Quad.

Mary Pickford was a neuroendocrinologist, researching the interaction between the nervous system and the endocrine system. She became the first woman appointed to a professorship in medicine at Edinburgh, when she was made Professor of Physiology in 1966. Pickford was also the first woman

to be elected to the Pharmacological Society in 1928, and she later remarked that wearing tweeds was essential if a female physiologist wanted to be taken seriously. Pickford made major contributions to our understanding of the central regulation of hormone release from the pituitary gland. Her research was outlined in her popular and hugely impactful book, “The Central Role of Hormones”.

Clara Marguerite Christian is widely recognised as the first Black female student to enrol at the University of Edinburgh, having “obstinately insisted on taking a full medical course”. She was born in Dominica in 1895 and began her degree in medicine in 1915.

Whilst studying at Edinburgh, Christian met her future husband, Edgar Gordon, and fell pregnant - at which point she dropped out of university. The couple married in 1917, and Gordon graduated and went on to a successful medical career. The impact of parenthood and lack of institutional support was felt solely by Christian, who never graduated.

Gordon and Christian divorced in 1927, and Christian successfully applied for a position at Achimota College, in modern-day Ghana. However, she was a single parent, and the role’s insecurity and relocation requirement meant she had to turn it down. Although a variety of systemic factors inhibited Christian’s own career, her determination to study medicine at Edinburgh paved the way for future women of colour at the University.

Old College

Eleanor Ormerod was a British entomologist who established the fields of economic and agricultural entomology. She published extensively on controlling insect pests from 1877-1900, establishing her as an authority on the topic.



Walk leaders at Old College © Miki Sun.

Ormerod was born in 1828 to a wealthy English family, however she was denied the educational opportunities her brothers received and never studied at university. Ormerod had developed an understanding of insects on her family's estate at a young age, but she did not begin researching entomology in earnest until she was in her 40s, after her parents had passed away.

Due to Ormerod's extensive publications, she became known as one of the greatest authorities on economic entomology in the world. She was the first woman to be given an honorary degree from Edinburgh University, and was also the first woman to be honoured with a Fellowship in the Meteorological Society. Her portrait used to hang at the foot of the south-east stair in Old College, however it has since been taken down due to an ongoing project.

Surgeons' Hall

The **Edinburgh Seven** were a group of women, led by **Sophia Jex-Blake**, who made history by becoming the first female students to be officially matriculated at a British university. They began studying medicine at the University of Edinburgh in 1869 although they were later denied the

opportunity to graduate due to gender bias.

In November 1870, the Edinburgh Seven faced violent opposition when they tried to take an anatomy exam at Surgeon's Hall. A large crowd of several hundred rioters, including male students, blocked the street, shouting abuse and pelting the Seven with rubbish and mud. The building gates were also slammed in their faces, preventing the women from entering the exam hall.



Plaque marking Surgeons' Hall riot, 1870.

This attack, known as the Surgeons' Hall riot, attracted widespread publicity and showed the extreme hostility the women experienced. Because of the riot and pressure from male students, the University of Edinburgh later stopped the women from attending classes. As a result, the Edinburgh Seven had to finish their studies abroad or at a separate medical school created by Jex-Blake.

Jex-Blake founded the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women in 1886. Upon her retirement in 1899, Jex-Blake moved to Sussex with Dr Margaret Todd - her romantic partner and one of the first students at her medical school. The two spent the rest of their lives together. Todd, a physician and writer, is also remembered for coining the term “isotope” in scientific literature.



Sophia Jex-Blake plaque, Old Medical School Quad.

Chrystal Macmillan Building

Chrystal Macmillan was a suffragist, peace activist, barrister, and the first female science graduate from the University of Edinburgh, as well as the institution’s first female honours graduate in mathematics.

Macmillan was born in Edinburgh in 1872, and in 1892 became among the first female students to enrol at the University. She studied science subjects, and graduated with a first-class

honours degree in mathematics and natural philosophy in 1896. Macmillan also returned to the University after graduation to undertake a further degree in Moral Philosophy and Logic.

Macmillan was an active member of the Edinburgh National Society for Women’s Suffrage, and protested the disconnect between female students being allowed membership of the General Council of Edinburgh University, and yet not allowed to vote for the Member of Parliament who would represent the university seat. Note, university seats in parliament existed for many of the ancient universities in Britain until 1950.

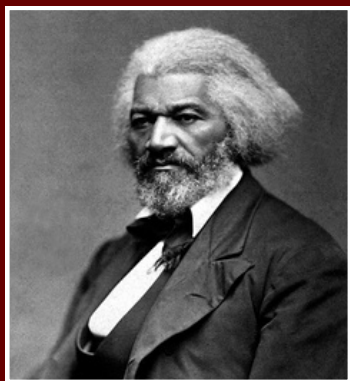
When WWI broke out, Macmillan became a peace activist, forming the International Congress of Women. Many of the peace proposals created by this congress were used during the formation of the League of Nations, the predecessor to the United Nations. As part of her activism, Macmillan also condemned the harsher terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of WWI, adamant they would cause future conflict. She passed away in 1937, just two years before she was proven right.

UNTOLD NARRATIVES

Marginalised Writers of Edinburgh

Brighton Street

Frederick Douglass was an American social reformer and writer, his most famous work being “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave”. He was born into slavery and was largely self-educated, rising to prominence as an



Frederick Douglass, the most photographed man of the 19th century.

abolitionist preacher after his first wife, Anna Murray, helped him escape his enslavers.

To preserve his freedom, Douglass was encouraged to tour Ireland and Britain, and he spent two years lecturing in churches and chapels. One of these churches was the Evangelical Union Chapel at the end of Brighton Street, which has since been demolished. Its existence can be seen on old maps of Edinburgh.

Douglass became a big proponent of the rise of the Scottish abolitionist movement, even being appointed “Scotland’s Antislavery Agent”. He largely succeeded in this role through inspiring national competition, arguing that support



19th Edinburgh, chapel marked by red dot © National Library of Scotland.

for abolition would prove Scotland's moral superiority over England.

Douglass went on to have a very successful career as a writer and orator, delivering his famous speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" in 1852, highlighting the hypocrisy and bigotry in the celebration of United States independence from British rule when 14% of its population was enslaved at the time.

George Square

Jane Welsh Carlyle lived at 23 George Square, and was widely regarded as an extraordinary letter writer, although she never published during her lifetime. In the 19th century, writing novels was a male-dominated pursuit, and women faced many barriers to doing so. Upon marrying, Welsh Carlyle led a traditional life and supported her husband in his

writing pursuits. Her husband maintained that she would have become a successful novelist had she not married him.

Welsh Carlyle had a long friendship with novelist Geraldine Jewsbury, marked by an intimate correspondence. Despite their closeness, Welsh Carlyle and Jewsbury often had disagreements about women's roles in marriage, with Jewsbury believing men and women should be equal. She saw how Welsh Carlyle's husband acted towards his wife and often criticised him.

The writers both agreed that if one of them passed away, the other would destroy their letters. Upon Welsh Carlyle's death, Jewsbury kept her promise and destroyed all of Jane's letters. However, many of Jewsbury's letters survived and reveal her passionate feelings for Welsh Carlyle, perhaps providing some clarity to her disapproval of the marriage.



Jane Welsh Carlyle plaque, 23 George Square.

Welsh Carlyle's letters were first published posthumously in 1889, and have since been widely collected, with notable authors such as Virginia Woolf calling her one of the "great letter writers".

The Grassmarket

Robert Louis Stevenson is one of the most famous Scottish authors, notably describing the Grassmarket in his novel "Kidnapped". However, his cousin Dorothy E. Stevenson was a bestselling author in her own right.

D. E. Stevenson was born in 1892, great-granddaughter of the famous lighthouse builder Robert Stevenson. She grew up in the West End of Edinburgh, and fell in love with writing at a young age. However, her father disapproved and banned her from writing, later refusing to send her to university lest she become a "bluestocking" - an educated woman.

Despite these barriers, Stevenson continued to write in secret as a teenager hiding in the family attic. She published her first poetry book in 1915, and went on to author over 40 novels and poetry collections in her lifetime, selling over seven million copies.

Her cousin Robert Louis Stevenson is ranked as the 26th most translated author in the world. Although D. E. Stevenson did not achieve the same acclaim, her books have been translated into seven languages, including braille. They were at the top of bestselling lists in Britain, South Africa and Australia.

This is all the more impressive, considering Stevenson never received a formal education, and faced so many obstructions to her writing. However, she always stated that writing was in her blood, and that her books were her "lighthouses". Today, Stevenson still has a large following in the USA, with her fans calling themselves "Dessies" or "DESSies".



The Grassmarket, featured in the novel "Kidnapped".

Lady Stair's Close

Robert Burns is Scotland's bard, known across the world for his poetry and songs. His life and works are celebrated in the Writers' Museum at Lady Stair's Close, alongside Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson. However, there was another famous author, born in Lady Stair's Close, who is only briefly mentioned in the museum.



The Writers' Museum, Lady Stair's Close.

Susan Ferrier was a successful novelist, born in 1782. She wrote vivid portrayals of Scottish life and women's education, with her novels set in Edinburgh and the Highlands. Like Burns, Ferrier often wrote in Scots, aiming to create a believable depiction of her worldly experience. This was distinctive at the time, with many intellectuals attempting to rid their work and speech of Scots.

Ferrier authored three novels in her lifetime: "Marriage", "The Inheritance", and "Destiny". Her brother secured the money for her novels instead of Ferrier, demonstrating the financial dependence of women at the time, even when they had established careers. Ferrier's last book was sold for an astonishing £115,000 in today's money.

Ferrier was later dubbed "Scotland's Jane Austen", although she is far lesser known - despite her novels outselling Austen's in the 19th century. She published anonymously, as did Austen, because it was not considered appropriate for women to have a public role in Victorian society.

Ferrier's novels declined in popularity throughout the 20th century, however several famous authors such as Val McDermid are trying to revive her memory.



Susan Ferrier plaque, East Morningside House where she wrote "The Inheritance".

ACTIVISM

Kings Buildings House

KB House is the student union at the University's King's Buildings campus, currently run by the Edinburgh University Student Association (EUSA). EUSA was founded in 1973 as a merger of various unions, and the King's Buildings House union was not added until 1989.

EUSA's activities are very broad, ranging from organising events to campaigning on their students' behalf. One of the most notable campaigns was established in 2010, and was the fight for same-sex marriage to be legalised in Scotland. EUSA and its president threw their weight behind the campaign for equal marriage and were very vocal in this area.

However, in 2011, an opposing campaign called Scotland for Marriage attracted more than 9000 online signatures. Controversially, 27 of the names belonged to

Edinburgh University students who supported same-sex marriage and did not consent to be added to the petition.

The students went to EUSA for help, who spoke to the press about it being a malicious act - throwing the petition into disrepute. An article was published in the Edinburgh News, and the National Union for Students criticised the Scotland for Marriage movement. Following the scandal, the student's names were removed. Same-sex marriage was legalised in Scotland three years later, in February 2014.



King's Buildings House.

Ashworth Building - Zoological Collection

The Ashworth building in King's Buildings hosts the University of Edinburgh's zoological specimens in the Natural History Collection. **John Edmonstone** was employed by the University as a taxidermist, preserving various specimens and tutoring students. It is possible many of his specimens ended up in the Collection.

Edmonstone was born into slavery, on a timber plantation in present-day Guyana. He was given the surname of his Scottish enslaver and plantation owner. In 1812, naturalist Charles Waterton (a friend of Edmonstone's enslaver) visited the plantation, and took Edmonstone on collecting expeditions as an assistant. He was able to learn taxidermy in a hot, humid climate, fostering skills that later came in very useful.

Edmonstone visited Scotland with his enslaver in 1817, likely as a servant, where he was subsequently freed, due to the owning of slaves being banned in Scotland in 1778. First taking up employment in Glasgow, Edmonstone eventually ended up in Edinburgh, setting up a



The Ashworth Building, home to the Natural History Collection.

taxidermy shop at 37 Lothian Street. He sold specimens to Edinburgh and Glasgow University's Zoological Museum, as well as offered private tuition to university students.

Charles Darwin arrived at the University of Edinburgh in 1825 to study medicine. Whilst there, his interest in natural history grew, and he hired Edmonstone to give him private lessons. The skills that Darwin learned from Edmonstone enabled him to collect and preserve specimens on his HMS Beagle voyage, crucial to him developing his Theory of Evolution. It is suspected that Edmonstone inspired Darwin's love of natural history, as well as his involvement in the abolitionist movement.

As the fashion for taxidermy became increasingly popular in the Victorian era, Edmonstone moved to new and more prestigious premises on South St. David Street. The 1841 census shows a 45 year old shopkeeper by the name of John Edmonstone living with a woman named Mary Kerr (who was his neighbour on Lothian Street) and their three children.

Although few details about Edmonstone's personal life survive, we know he was a talented and respected taxidermist and naturalist. In 2009, a plaque was unveiled in his memory outside his house on Lothian Street. This was the first plaque in Edinburgh to mark the life and contributions of a Black person and has since disappeared. It has not been replaced.

Alexander Crum Brown Road

The Edinburgh Seven were the first group of matriculated undergraduate female students at any British university, mentioned earlier in this booklet. They began studying at the University of Edinburgh in 1869 although they were later denied the opportunity to graduate.

The Hope Scholarship had been instituted 40 years previously and was awarded to the top four students in the first-term chemistry exams. During the Edinburgh Seven's time at university, this scholarship was awarded by Dr Alexander Crum Brown, a lauded chemist.



Alexander Crum Brown Road sign at King's Buildings.

Edith Pechey, one of the Edinburgh Seven, had won first place amongst the candidates sitting the Physics and Chemistry exam and so had first claim on the Hope Scholarship.

However, Dr Alexander Crum-Brown chose to award the Hope Scholarship to a male student who had scored lower. The cited reason was that "women are not part of the University class, because they are separately taught".

However, it is likely that the real reason was due to many of Brown's respected colleagues and male students beginning to

express resentment of the presence of women in the University. Fearing that awarding the prize to a woman would be both an affront to male staff and students, Crum Brown sidelined Pechey. This tension was demonstrated by the 1870 riot mentioned earlier.

Royal Observatory

On the 21st of May 1913, the Royal Observatory was bombed by suffragettes, fighting for women to gain the vote.

The Dalkeith Advertiser reported the next day, “the bomb exploded about one o’clock in the morning, causing considerable damage...



The Royal Observatory, Edinburgh.

The perpetrators left behind them a ladies' handbag of the kind used for shopping. It contained a few currant biscuits wrapped in paper, a couple of safety pins, and in the grounds were found two pieces of paper. On one of them was written in ink 'How beggarly appears argument before defiant deed. Votes for women.'"

The bomb cracked the masonry of the West Tower, and broke some windows, however no one was harmed and the telescope was not damaged. No one was ever charged with the attack, and it remains unclear whether the bombing was due to the Observatory being a public institution, with the suffragettes focussing on similar buildings during their campaign, or because at the time, the Observatory only employed men.

On the 100th anniversary of the attack, the Observatory issued a public plea for more information, hoping that with the threat of prosecution long past, relatives of those involved might now come forward - but no further information has surfaced.

A piece of the jar used in the bomb is on display at Edinburgh Royal Observatory.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Johnstone Terrace

Before the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act made schooling compulsory for children aged 5 to 13, poor families in Georgian Edinburgh had little to no access to education. This led to a rise in youth gangs, particularly in areas like Grassmarket and Canongate. On Hogmanay 1811, several gangs rioted - armed with clubs, they roamed the streets attacking bystanders. One group stormed a midnight service at the Tron Kirk. Two people, including a police officer, were killed. Several gang members were arrested; some were transported, while three - all under the age of 18 - were hanged for murder.

Church leaders concluded that education for the poor was essential to prevent further delinquency and violence.

Sunday Schools were set up in every parish, though they failed to reach all children. In 1837, Rev. Thomas Guthrie, newly appointed to Greyfriars Kirk, opened a makeshift classroom beneath the church, offering free meals and basic lessons. His efforts led to the foundation of two more "ragged schools" nearby, on Johnstone Terrace and Ramsay Lane.



St Columba's Free Church on Johnstone Terrace, originally Free St John's Church, host to one of the schools.

The ragged schools (so called because the children often wore rags) had a unique curriculum; providing education, regular meals, clothing, industrial training and Christian instruction. Children attended 12 hours a day in summer and 11 in winter, starting at 8am with 'ablutions' (washing oneself) and ending at 7:15pm after supper.

Though widely supported, helping cut child imprisonment by 75%, the schools were criticised for their Protestant bias. In response to the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants in the 1840s, especially in Cowgate (dubbed "Little Ireland"), the United Industrial School was founded nearby, employing a Catholic teacher to lead worship.

St John's Episcopal Church

In the mid-19th century, as the British Empire looked to train a class of elite Indians for roles in science, medicine, and administration across the colonies, Edinburgh University saw a growing influx of Indian students. In 1883, these students established the Indian Association - the first South Asian student society in the UK. Initially based at 11 George Square and later at 3 Potterrow, the Association

championed progressive causes such as the abolition of capital punishment and was among the first university societies in Edinburgh to admit women.

Between 1927 and 1934, Indian students faced open racial discrimination when local restaurants and cafés in Edinburgh imposed a colour bar, refusing service to non-white patrons. The Indian Association led a high-profile campaign against this injustice, becoming a powerful voice for racial equality in the city.



Inside St John's Episcopal Church.

A memorial at St John's Episcopal Church commemorates two men - Alexander Tod, a captain in the East India Company, and George Swinton, a senior colonial official who sent Indian scientific

specimens to Edinburgh University. Both amassed wealth through imperial exploitation in India, highlighting the deep colonial ties that underpinned Edinburgh's institutions.



Memorial to Alexander Tod, inside St John's Episcopal Church.

Shandwick Place

The Edinburgh Association for the University Education of Women (EAUEW), originally the Edinburgh Ladies' Educational Association (ELEA), campaigned from 1867 to 1892 for women's access to higher education. Part of a broader European movement, the Association contributed evidence to a government commission, helping shape the Universities (Scotland) Act of 1889, which led to the admission of women to Scottish universities.

Though separate from the controversy around the Edinburgh Seven (Britain's first female medical students), the ELEA offered university-level courses to

women in subjects ranging from English and Mathematics to Chemistry and Bible Criticism. The lectures were given by Edinburgh University academics in a room in 15 Shandwick Place. When women were formally admitted to the University in 1892, the group shifted focus to supporting female students, providing accommodation and a library at 31 George Square. It remained active until the 1970s.



15 Shandwick Place, where EAUEW classes were held.

Prior to this organisation, women had rarely attended University of Edinburgh lectures, with the exception of James Barry (born Margaret Anne Bulkley). Barry graduated from Edinburgh in 1812 and served in the British Army as a medical officer, rising to the rank of Inspector General in charge of military hospitals, the second-highest medical office in the British Army. Barry had an illustrious career and performed the first recorded caesarean

section by a European in Africa, in which both the mother and child survived. Barry lived as a man both in public and private (using the name James in letters to family), and their anatomy only became known to the public and military colleagues upon a post-mortem examination.

Randolph Crescent

The **Stevenson sisters**, Louisa and Flora, were founder members of the Edinburgh Ladies' Educational Association (ELEA), and were prominent figures in the women's rights movement.



Stevenson Sisters plaque on their house at 13 Randolph Crescent.

Louisa's priority was the struggle for women to be allowed medical training and to qualify as doctors: she was honorary treasurer of a committee formed to support Sophia Jex-Blake and help with legal costs in her campaign to open medical education to women. Louisa was one of the first two women elected to the Edinburgh Parochial Board (boards set up by parishes to help

the poor) and was concerned particularly about improving the standard of nursing in the city poorhouse. In 1875, she and Christian Guthrie Wright founded the Edinburgh School of Cookery, with a focus on improving the diets of those in poverty. This school later became Queen Margaret University.

In 1872, the Education (Scotland) Act enabled women to serve on school boards. Flora was elected to the Edinburgh School Board in 1873, becoming one of the first women elected to a school board in the UK. She became the first woman chair of the Board and was re-elected for 33 years until her death. In 1892, Flora became an Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland. She was also a committee member of the United Industrial Schools of Edinburgh and ardent supporter of ragged schools.

Both sisters lived to see women attend university, although they never did so themselves – perhaps Louisa was the first founder of a modern university to not have a degree. The Stevensons were also suffragists, however passed away before they could benefit from their efforts, with the vote not given to women until over a decade after their deaths.

SCIENTISTS

Xia Peisu Training Room, JCMB

Xia Peisu was a Chinese computer scientist, hailed as "the mother of computer science in China". In 1941, Xia matriculated at the National Central University, to study electrical engineering. This was during the Second Sino-Japanese War, with the National Central University relocated after the Japanese capture of Nanjing. Xia graduated in 1945 and went on to study for a PhD at the University of Edinburgh in 1947.

Xia returned to China in 1951, during the beginning of the Cold War. The Chinese Communist Party began a coalition with the Soviet Union, who assisted China's scientific and technological advancement. Xia became involved in this work, recruited to lead the development of China's first general-purpose electronic computer.



JCMB, home to the Xia Peisu Training Room.

In 1960, the Sino-Soviet partnership dissolved, and many assumed this development would end. However, despite two of her colleagues leaving the project, Xia completed Model 107, China's first indigenously designed computer.

Xia went on to become a founding professor at the Institute of Computing Technology, established two journals, and wrote the first systematic computer science textbook in China. Xia also taught China's first course in computer theory and

was elected as an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The Xia Peisu Training Room in the James Clerk Maxwell Building was named after her, and her many contributions to computer science.

Max Born Crescent

Max Born was a German-British physicist who helped found quantum mechanics and was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954. Born into a Jewish family, he was suspended from his professorship at the University of Göttingen in 1933 following the rise of the Nazi party. Born, now a refugee, took up a post at Cambridge University, and became stateless in 1935 when his German citizenship was revoked.

His position at Cambridge was temporary and so he considered an offer from Moscow, even taking Russian lessons, but was offered Edinburgh's Tait professorship in 1936, which he promptly accepted. He became a naturalised citizen just one day before WWII broke out.



Max Born Crescent sign at King's Buildings.

Klaus Fuchs, a German refugee working alongside Born at Edinburgh University, was not so lucky. His citizenship application had not been processed before WWII began. Born attempted to prove his assistant was not an enemy alien, providing a reference that said he was anti-Nazi. Nevertheless, Fuchs was taken into custody and interned on the Isle of Man, and then in Canada for a year.

Born successfully lobbied for his release and Fuchs returned to work for him in Edinburgh in 1941. However, in 1950 Fuchs was convicted of supplying information from the American, British, and Canadian Manhattan Project to the Soviet Union, during and after WWII.

Born later employed another German displaced from his home (E. Walter Kellermann), and helped many of his friends and relatives flee Germany. Born's wife, Hedi Ehrenberg, founded a domestic bureau to find work for young Jewish women in the UK.

Born made Edinburgh his home from 1936 until 1952 when he retired aged 70. His granddaughter was the singer Dame Olivia Newton-John.

Edmund Hirst Laboratory, Christina Miller Building

Geoff Palmer was a Jamaican - British brewing chemist, life scientist and human rights activist. He was born in Jamaica in 1940, and moved to London in 1955. Palmer studied botany at undergraduate level, and was later accepted to study a PhD in grain science, jointly between the University of Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt University. His supervisor in Edinburgh was the chemist Edmund Hirst, who has a laboratory named after him in the Christina Miller Building.



The Christina Miller Building, home to the Edmund Hirst Laboratory.

Palmer's research career was extensive, discovering the barley abrasion process, and establishing the International Centre for Brewing and Distilling. In 1985,

Heriot Watt awarded him a Doctor of Science, and he was made professor in 1989. This made Palmer the first Black professor in Scotland, an achievement reached only 36 years ago.

Palmer was a recognised world authority on the Atlantic slave trade. He authored "The Enlightenment Abolished: Citizens of Britishness", a book on Scotland's history of slavery. He served as Honorary President of the Edinburgh and Lothian's Regional Equality Council (ELREC), an organisation dedicated to combating discrimination and promoting equality.

Sadly, Palmer passed away aged 85 in June 2025.

Noreen and Kenneth Murray Library

Noreen Murray was an English geneticist, and pioneer of genetic engineering. Murray and her husband (Sir Kenneth Murray) together developed the first genetically engineered vaccine approved for human use, against hepatitis B. The couple established the Darwin Trust of Edinburgh to which they donated the royalty earnings from the hepatitis B vaccine.

This Trust has provided funds to construct the University of Edinburgh Darwin Library and Michael Swann Building, as well as provided numerous bursaries to support students from overseas to study in Edinburgh.

Murray's work shaped all areas of biology and her pioneering contributions to the field were recognised internationally. She received honorary degrees from the Universities of Warwick, Manchester, Birmingham, and Lancaster. She held a personal chair at Edinburgh, was president of the Genetical Society, and vice president of the Royal Society.

Murray was also known to be a great mentor to other female scientists, a fact which her obituary highlighted: "Noreen was particularly attentive to the



The Noreen and Kenneth Murray Library.

careers of her female colleagues and delighted in their success."

The University named a library after the Murrays, and planted a memorial tree opposite. However, the tree was moved to an unknown location during the building of the Nucleus.

Alumni Wall - Nucleus Building

The University's Nucleus Building features an Alumni Wall of pioneering scientists, all of whom are female. Although not all have been discussed in the Edinburgh Historic Walks project, they each led very interesting lives and careers:

- Molly Fergusson
- Charlotte Auerbach
- Christina Miller
- Chrystal Macmillan
- Marion Ross
- Sophia Jex-Blake
- Mary Brück
- Honor Fell



Alumni Wall, Nucleus Building.

SCANDALOUS BODIES

Queer Desire and Sex Work in 18th and 19th Century Edinburgh

Acheson House

In the 19th century, Edinburgh had around 800 prostitutes and 200 brothels for a population of less than 150,000. Sex workers would have been a common sight on the Royal Mile, with many conducting their trade in local spirit dealers - such as the National Trust property Gladstone's Land.

Further down the Mile on Bakehouse Close is Acheson House. This 17th century building was constructed for Sir Archibald Acheson, Secretary of State for Scotland. The family crest featuring a cockerel and trumpet is carved above the entrance. By the early 1800s, the building had been repurposed as a brothel, as the cities' elites moved to the New Town. The house soon earned the cheeky nickname among locals: "The Cock & Strumpet".

The Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum, founded in 1797 in the Canongate, was initially intended to be a refuge for women leaving prison. One of at least four in the city, it soon shifted to its mission of rehabilitating women trying to leave sex work. These institutions were charitable organisations, funded by church collections and private donations, established to provide so-called "fallen women" with religious and vocational instruction before placing them in domestic service.

Whilst framed as benevolent institutions, in reality the Asylums targeted the most vulnerable and isolated young women (often teenagers and pregnant women). In theory, residents were free to leave at any time, but in practice this was rarely possible.

These institutions were steeped in class hierarchy and misogyny, overwhelmingly focussing on working-class women who were presumed to be of lower moral character. They ignored the reality that sex work involved men and individuals from middle and upper-class backgrounds as well.

Robert Louis Stevenson's family contributed to the Magdalen Asylum's efforts and actively campaigned against prostitution, however Stevenson himself reportedly indulged in the city's seedier pleasures during his time as a student. The brothel in Bakehouse Close was known to be his favourite haunt.



Acheson House entrance featuring the Cock and Trumpet.

Bell's Wynd

"Ranger's Impartial List of Ladies of Pleasure", published in 1775 and authored by James Tytler, served as

an 18th century guidebook to Edinburgh's sex trade - offering individual descriptions of 66 women and a fold-out map indicating where they could be found.

James Tytler was the son of a Presbyterian minister and originally trained for the ministry himself. He later gained scholarly recognition as the editor of the second edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica. In 1784, he made history as the first person in Britain to ascend in a hot air balloon. He was also a close associate of Sir Walter Scott, who may have participated in some of Tytler's more illicit pursuits.

According to Ranger's List, Bell's Wynd was the territory of Miss Walker and Miss Menzies. Miss Walker owned an expensive "genteel" brothel employing 8 women, while Miss Menzies worked alongside just one other woman. While Miss Walker had a house, Miss Menzies probably rented and worked out of a single room. Landlords often preferred renting to prostitutes as they could charge exorbitant rates the average day labourer could not afford.

All brothels listed were operated by women, each employing between one and nine others.

Despite the stigma, prostitution did offer the potential for social mobility for those who managed to attract wealthy patrons. Of the 66 women featured on the list, ten were either married or soon to be. There are also at least two possible LGBTQ+ figures featured. One goes by the alias 'Henry' and the other wears men's clothing, and they were both employed at the same brothel, showing it catered to a certain audience.



The entrance to Bell's Wynd on the Mile.

Scott Monument

Functioning between 1732 and 1836, the Beggar's Benison Club was known for its libertine practices and elaborate sexual ceremonies, often with homoerotic insinuations. Originally founded in Anstruther, Fife, the club later established offshoots in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and even St. Petersburg. Its early members were mainly local merchants and minor gentry, but over time the club attracted elite men - including the future King George IV, and allegedly Sir Walter Scott.

A number of club artefacts have survived, among them a snuff box containing pubic hair, reportedly presented by George IV. The gift was said to replace an earlier ceremonial wig made from the pubic hair of King Charles II's mistresses, traditionally worn by the club's leader. Their motto, "May prick nor purse ne'er fail you," encapsulated their blend of sexual and material indulgence.

Homoerotic activities ranged from phallus comparison to drinking from penis-shaped vessels and participating in group masturbation for collective inspection. When the Beggar's Benison folded, the last £70 in club funds were used to buy books for a primary school in Fife.



Walter Scott monument from Princes Street Gardens.

Charlotte Square

In 1810, two Edinburgh school teachers sued for libel after they were accused of lesbianism, resulting in the collapse of their school. The school had been founded the previous year by Marianne Woods, her aunt Ann Woods and friend Jane Pirie.

The school was on the site of present-day Drumsheugh Gardens, and its central location and prestigious reputation attracted pupils from Edinburgh's most influential families. Lady Helen Cumming Gordon, a widow living at the newly built 22 Charlotte Square, sent her granddaughter, Jane, to board there.

Jane was born in India to an Indian mother and Scottish father.



Lady Helen Gordon's house, 22 Charlotte Square.

After her father died, her paternal grandmother placed her in an apprenticeship with a Scottish milliner, before moving her to the Woods-Pirie school to receive a more ladylike education. Despite her aristocratic connections, Jane appears to have been treated harshly, likely due to both racism, and her illegitimacy.

The school housed ten boarders in two dormitories, with both teachers sharing a bed with a pupil for nighttime supervision. This arrangement was not unusual at the time. However, on Saturday 10th November 1810, Jane visited her grandmother and reported witnessing what she described as a sexual relationship between Woods and Pirie.

Seeking further confirmation, Lady Helen questioned Jane's cousin, another pupil at the school, who affirmed the rumours. Lady Helen withdrew both girls from the school and sent letters urging other parents to do the same.

The consequences were swift: nearly all pupils were removed, and the school collapsed. Woods and Pirie responded by suing Lady Helen for £10,000 in

damages, alleging false and defamatory accusations that had ruined their reputations.

The case came before the Edinburgh Court of Session in Parliament Square. Jane, a key witness for the defence, testified alongside other pupils and a school servant. She maintained her claim that the teachers were sexually involved, stating that Miss Woods frequently visited Miss Pirie's bed - where Jane also slept. The prosecution's approach was to discredit Jane's character, by attacking her mixed heritage, illegitimacy, and upbringing in India.

Bias extended beyond Jane's background. At least one judge openly dismissed the possibility of sexual relations between two women, reflecting the gendered and heteronormative assumptions that underpinned much of the case. Lord Meadowbank commented that the idea of two women having sex was "equally imaginary with witchcraft, sorcery or carnal copulation with the devil".

Miss Woods and Miss Pirie eventually won the case, although they received little compensation after legal fees.

The court case inspired Lillian Hellman's 1934 play "The Children's Hour", and later film starring Audrey Hepburn. Due to stigma at the time, some performances of the play altered the topic to avoid the lesbian theme. Although the film kept the theme in tact, the actual word "lesbian" was not allowed to be said on-screen. Similar racial erasure took place in the film, as Jane Cummings is presented as white.

The true story behind The Children's Hour provides a stark contrast to the Ranger's List and booming sex trade in Edinburgh at the time: the disbelief and censorship of a relationship between two genteel women appears to be in direct odds to the blatant nature of the Ranger's List and clubs like the Beggar's Benison, which did not hide the LGBTQ+ nature of their activities. It could perhaps be said that what was allowed to be spoken about in "proper" society was at direct odds with the actual desires of the population of Edinburgh, and the histories on-the-ground.

Further Information:

Women In Stem

- *My Good Lady* - dramatised account of Elsie Inglis's wartime service, Gary Mill, 2016.
- *A Fair Field And No Favour: The History of Women In Surgery* - temporary exhibition at Surgeon's Hall Museums until March 2026, featuring Elsie Inglis.
- *UncoverED Archival Project: Clara Marguerite Christian*
<https://global.ed.ac.uk/uncover-ed/1910/clara-marguerite-christian>.
- *Lillian Mary Pickford*, Royal Society Publishing
<https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbm.2019.0008>.
- *Eleanor Ormerod*, University of Oxford's Museum of Natural History
<https://oumnh.ox.ac.uk/learn-eleanor-anne-ormerod>.
- The Chrystal Macmillan building has an exhibition dedicated to its namesake:



Untold Narratives

- *An American Slave*, Fredrick Douglass, 1845.
- Map of Edinburgh locations related to Fredrick Douglass, Edinburgh University and the National Library of Scotland
<https://maps.nls.uk/projects/douglass/>.
- *I Too Am Here: Selections from the Letters of Jane Welsh Carlyle*, Alan & Mary McQueen Simpson, 2010.
- *Rediscovered: D.E. Stevenson*, Books From Scotland
<https://booksfromscotland.com/2019/08/rediscovered-d-e-stevenson/>.
- *Marriage, Inheritance, and Destiny*, Susan Ferrier, 1810-1831.
- The Writer's Museum, in Lady Stair's Close, Edinburgh.

Activism

- *Students lobby MSPs as accuracy of marriage opponents' petition is questioned*, Pink News
<https://bit.ly/47IXAio>.
- *John Edmonstone: the man who taught Darwin taxidermy*, Natural History Museum
<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/john-edmonstone-the-man-who-taught-darwin-taxidermy.html>.

- The Royal Observatory Edinburgh Visitor Centre has a fragment of the suffragette bomb on display, not far from where it exploded.
- The Main Library has a collection from the Lothian Gay and Lesbian Switchboard which operated from 1974 to 2010 - 4 years before same-sex marriage was legalised in Scotland.

Access to Education

- *Religion and Relationships in Ragged Schools: An Intimate History of Educating the Poor, 1844-1870*, Dr Laura Mair, 2019.
- *The Edinburgh Colour Bars*, Historic Environment Scotland <https://blog.historicenvironment.scot/2021/01/the-edinburgh-colour-bars/>.
- *Edinburgh Association for the University Education of Women*, Edinburgh University Library Heritage Collections <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/7ea3fcb6-5943-3f11-b573-e56f14ec069b>.
- Recollections of the public work and home life of Louisa and Flora Stevenson, E.T. McLaren, 1914.

Scientists

- *The computer pioneer who built modern China*, BBC <http://bit.ly/4pc0QZE>.
- *My Life: Recollections of a Nobel Laureate*, Max Born, 1975.
- *The Enlightenment Abolished: Citizens of Britishness*, Geoff Palmer, 2007.
- *Noreen Murray CBE*, Royal Society Publishing <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbm.2014.0009>.

Scandalous Bodies

- *Brothel to see new action as museum*, the Scotsman <https://www.scotsman.com/news/brothel-to-see-new-action-as-museum-1682190>.
- *Ranger's Impartial List of Ladies of Pleasure*, James Tytler available on Horntip <http://bit.ly/4m714Q3>.
- *Beggar's Benison*, University of St Andrews Collections <https://collections.st-andrews.ac.uk/collection/beggars-benison/1004071>.
- *The Children's Hour*, 1961 film starring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine.
- *Scotch Verdict: The Real-Life Story That Inspired "The Children's Hour"*, Lillian Faderman, 2013.

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We hope you enjoyed reading about the marginalised histories of the city of Edinburgh. If you would like to hear more about the project, you are very welcome to reach out to Katie Grieve (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/katie-grieve/>) or Katherine Scott (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/katherine-scott-/>).

