

2001

# Cleansing the Hawker's Basket: Popular Literature and the Cheap Periodical Press in Scotland

Scott A. McLean

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McLean, Scott A. (2001) "Cleansing the Hawker's Basket: Popular Literature and the Cheap Periodical Press in Scotland," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 32: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol32/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

Scott A. McLean

## Cleansing the Hawker's Basket: Popular Literature and the Cheap Periodical Press in Scotland

While all popular literature was in a sense cheap, in the early nineteenth century when an individual referred to cheap literature they were describing something which stood apart from the chapbooks, almanacs and broadsides in circulation. What they were referring to was a new form of publication, a periodical published either weekly or monthly, at a price within reach of the lower-classes (usually 6d or less). This new form of literature was being developed throughout Britain, but was particularly prominent in Scotland. In fact, apart from a few figures such as Hannah More, the philanthropist and educator best known for her Cheap Repository Tracts, and Charles Knight, the principle publisher for the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (hereafter SDUK) almost all of the key players were Scots.

The development of cheap literature can be divided into four distinct periods: 1768-1794, 1795-1820, 1820-1832, and 1832-1845. In all stages the primary goal of the literature remained the same: to inform, instruct and amuse. However, how and why this goal was carried out changed dramatically. The first stage is dominated by a series of short-lived experiments into the field of cheap periodical publishing. The first, and most successful, early attempt was begun in 1768, when Walter Ruddiman, a Scot and nephew of the famous grammarian Thomas Ruddiman, published the *Weekly Magazine or Edinburgh Amusement*. Like others, which followed, the *Weekly Magazine* included a wide variety of topics, "The Essence of all the Magazines, Reviews,

Newspapers, ... published in Great Britain."<sup>1</sup> Besides a varied assortment of light reading the work included articles of a more practical nature suitable "for the requirements of physician, virtuoso, country gentleman, merchant, mechanic and farmer."<sup>2</sup> Another interesting periodical from this early stage was *The Bee or Literary Weekly Intelligencer*, which ran from 1791 until 1794. Published by Dr. James Anderson, the well-known agriculturalist and expert on the fisheries, *The Bee* included essays, poetry, literary criticism and short tales on a wide variety of topics including those closest to the editor's heart: science, agriculture, manufacturing, navigation and trade. Publications such as these provided a balance between information and amusement, containing a wide range of topics including politics, something which later experiments in cheap literature were careful to avoid.

A political climate of suppression brought on by the war with France and publications like Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, made it increasingly difficult to produce literature for a mass audience, particularly if it included anything of a political nature. James Anderson discovered this first hand when he admitted a number of articles on the political progress of Britain into *The Bee*. The articles quickly aroused the suspicion of the authorities; within a short time he was called before the sheriff and was only saved by the esteem associated with his name.<sup>3</sup> Few were willing to take such a risk, therefore we see a considerable drop in the number of cheap periodicals being produced during the 1790s.

In the period following 1794 we find a definite shift taking place in the character of the cheap literature being produced. In England Hannah More established her highly successful *Cheap Repository Tracts*; works of an evangelical, heavily moralistic tone.<sup>4</sup> A similar program was underway in Scotland with the efforts of the Religious Tract and Book Society, later to become the Scottish Colportage Society.<sup>5</sup> More and the Religious Tract Society shared

---

<sup>1</sup>From the title page of the first edition, printed in George Harvey Johnston, *The Ruddimans in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1901), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup>G. A. Sinclair, "Periodical Literature of the Eighteenth Century," *Scottish Historical Review*, II (Jan. 1905), 145.

<sup>3</sup>William James Couper, *The Edinburgh Periodical Press from the Earliest Times to 1800*, 2 vols. (Stirling, 1908), II, 182.

<sup>4</sup>Between 1795 and 1798 Hannah More published 114 such tracts, at least 50 of which she wrote herself. See Victor E. Neuburg, *The Batsford Companion to Popular Literature* (London, 1982), p. 134. Henceforth Neuburg.

<sup>5</sup>William Donaldson, "Popular Literature: The Press, the People, and the Vernacular Revival," *The History of Scottish Literature*, III, ed. Douglas Gifford (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 205. Henceforth Donaldson.

common goals as both disseminated a literature which would “provide, at a very low price, a corrective to atheism and radicalism” (Neuburg, p. 133), and instill a proper regard for the social order.

During this stage there were two periodicals produced in Scotland which followed the example set by the Tract Society’s: *The Scotch Cheap Repository*, launched by the Reverend Henry Duncan of Ruthwell in 1807, and George Miller of Haddington’s *Cheap Magazine*, which ran during the years 1813-1814. Both Duncan and Miller are representative of what Laurence Saunders called “the Popular Enlightenment in Scotland,”<sup>6</sup> and what J. V. Smith refers to as “a movement for popular enlightenment through natural theology.”<sup>7</sup> Their publications consisted primarily of moral tales aimed at seeing the “sentiments of the lower classes acquire their proper tone” (Smith, p. 26.).

The *Scotch Cheap Repository* was published monthly and was modeled after More’s tracts, which provided an excellent example for Duncan to follow. In the preface Duncan lists his intentions as being

To adapt this captivating mode of instruction to the religious sentiments, as well as to the manners and habits, of the intellectual peasantry in this northern division of the United Kingdom; and particularly, by exciting a local interest in the publication, to render it subservient to the moral and spiritual improvement of their own parishioners.<sup>8</sup>

As the tales were aimed primarily at a rural audience they were dominated by rural themes: “The Honest Farmer,” “The Country Clergyman,” “The Farmers Sabbath,” to name a few examples. George Miller’s *Cheap Magazine* followed a similar, albeit more expanded program of instruction. The moral tales at the beginning of each issue was followed by pieces on the “Progress of Genius,” illustrating the lives of famous people who began life in obscurity, “Useful Information,” on such topics as gardening and household accidents, and a section devoted to poetry.<sup>9</sup>

Both Miller’s and Duncan’s periodicals were designed for similar purposes—to combat what were perceived as the growing social ills in society: crime, drunkenness, irreligious behavior and a breakdown in traditional family

---

<sup>6</sup>Laurence Saunders, *Scottish Democracy: 1815-1840* (Edinburgh, 1950), p. 248.

<sup>7</sup>J. V. Smith, “Manners, Morals and Mentalities: Reflections on the Popular Enlightenment of Early Nineteenth-Century Scotland,” in *Scottish Culture and Scottish Education: 1800-1980*, ed. Walter M. Humes and Hamish W. Paterson (Edinburgh, 1983), 47. Henceforth Smith.

<sup>8</sup>Henry Duncan, Preface, *Scotch Cheap Repository* (Edinburgh, 1815) p. iii.

<sup>9</sup>George Miller, *The Cheap Magazine*, 1 (Haddington, 1813).

values. This was to be accomplished by instilling "a state for reading and diffusing useful instruction among the vulgar" (Smith, p. 26). The use of the term "vulgar" in describing the potential readers of the periodical is important as it represents a decided shift in how the prospective audience was perceived. Prior to the 1790s the cheap literature that was produced had for the most part been established as a business venture and in recognition of an increased need within the world of publishing for a more affordable form of periodical than the traditional, more expensive works such as the *Scot's Magazine* or the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Works published after 1794 professed the same goals, to inform, instruct and amuse; however, this was now being done as part of a definite social program designed to morally reform the lower classes.

The use of cheap literature as a means of moral reform would continue into the third and fourth stages of the movement, however, after 1820 the methods used were less blatant than those of the previous period. The 1820s represent a dynamic period in Scottish publishing, which witnessed a definite shift in intellectual leadership from the clergymen and professors to the novelists and essayists, brining about the "full bloom" of Scottish literary culture.<sup>10</sup> And equally significant was the rapid expansion of the adult education movement, in particular the rise of the Mechanics Institutes. The "March of Intellect" of the 1820s saw science move fully into the field of popular education, taking a prominent place amongst the instructive literature being produced. This phase is dominated by such figures as Scott, Constable, Cadell, and the SDUK.

The final stage represents the cheap literature movement coming of age, as it was in this stage that the two most successful periodicals of this type were established. Chambers's *Edinburgh Journal* and the SDUK's *Penny Magazine* were both extremely successful periodicals, which reached unprecedented levels of circulation. The first numbers of the *Edinburgh Journal* were confined to Scotland yet reached a circulation of 31,000. A separate London impression was added which brought the number to 50,000 copies a week—and by 1845 the number had risen to 90,000.<sup>11</sup> The *Penny Magazine* temporarily surpassed even this, reportedly reaching an unprecedented circulation of 200,000 weekly and monthly parts. Such numbers are perhaps the best evidence that there was an expanding readership with new tastes emerging in the 1820s and 1830s.

During this period Scottish society was being rapidly transformed by agricultural improvement and industrialization, both of which radically altered the

---

<sup>10</sup>Alexander Murdoch and Richard B. Sher, "Literary and Learned Culture," in *People and Society in Scotland: 1760-1830*, ed. T. M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison (Edinburgh, 1988), I, 138.

<sup>11</sup>See William Chambers, *Memoir of William and Robert Chambers* (Edinburgh, 1893), p. 234; and R. R. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader* (London, 1955), p. 77.

traditional character of society. The traditional bonds between tenant and laird broke down as rural society moved to a capitalist economy. Rapid industrialization radically altered the urban landscape and created a host of problems with which government and society were ill equipped to deal. By the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was an increased gulf between rich and poor, a middle class which had taken on its own identity, and a working class which was for the first time gaining consciousness of its own unique place within the newly created industrial society. Contemporaries also noted another trend, which was most disturbing to them: an increased secularization of society, particularly amongst the rapidly expanding working class.<sup>12</sup> It is my contention that as divisions became more apparent the middle and upper classes could no longer identify with the literature (and culture) of the “lower orders.” Popular literature was increasingly viewed as vulgar, immoral and an obstacle to the necessary moral reform of the lower classes of society.

An excellent example of this change in attitude towards popular literature is given by Edward Bannerman Ramsay in his *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character*, where he describes a note he received in 1821 from Mrs. Keith of Ravelstone, grand-aunt of Sir Walter Scott, who wrote:

Is it not a very odd thing that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel myself ashamed to read a book which, sixty years ago, I have heard read aloud for the amusement of large circles, consisting of the first and most creditable society in London.<sup>13</sup>

By the early decades of the nineteenth century it was no longer proper for a person of social standing to read the traditional literature of the people. We therefore find a definite opposition to the chapbook and other forms of popular literature developing during the period under study. The best evidence for this comes from those individuals promoting cheap literature after 1794. From this point forward the movement was part of a middle class, largely evangelical, social program with cleansing the hawkers basket, as one of its primary goals.

What evidence is there for such a claim? The religious tract societies, which began operation in the 1790s openly, acknowledged that they opposed popular forms of literature. Hannah More had established her religious tracts

---

<sup>12</sup>Without question urbanization had a dramatic impact upon the religious life of the working-class population. The author cites the destruction of older forms of community, a loss of the traditional social and moral values, and a lack of stability within the social order as being some of the more important side effects of urbanization. These were the very changes which most concerned George Miller and others participating in Scotland’s popular enlightenment. See Alisdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (London, 1967), pp. 11-15.

<sup>13</sup>Edward Bannerman Ramsay, *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character*, 21<sup>st</sup> edn. (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 249.

both to stamp out atheism and radicalism, and “offer a challenge to the continuing popularity of the ‘godless’ chapbook” (Neuburg, p. 51). In letter of 1796 More wrote:

I am more anxious than ever for the extension of the plan, as I have had sent down to me halfpenny papers, printed at the seditious ships, full of the most horrid blasphemy and profaneness. Vulgar and indecent penny books were always common, but speculative infidelity, brought down to the pockets and capacities of the poor, forms a new era in our history. This requires strong counteraction...<sup>14</sup>

In the same letter Mrs. More goes on to describe how a number of her friends had “condescended to spend hours with the hawkers, to learn the mysteries of their trade”; the result of which was the Tract Society printing two separate editions, one handsome one for sale to the rich, the other on coarser paper, and “so excessively cheap by wholesale, as fully to meet the hawkers on their own ground” (More, p. 458). In order to compete the tracts of both Hannah More and the Religious Tract and Book Society of Scotland were developed in imitation of the chapbooks they were designed to counteract. They were similar in size, printed on coarse paper, and often illustrated with crude woodcuts.<sup>15</sup> As time passed the tracts became more direct and sensational, including tales of shipwrecks and shocking accidents, some even making use of vernacular Scots to appeal to their prospective audience (Donaldson, pp. 204-5).

George Miller also recognized the value of using chapbooks as a model. In 1798 Miller began diversifying his small printing business; for the first time publishing some children’s books, shorter catechisms, and, most interesting of all, an assortment of what he called “24 mo. Pamphlets” or chapbooks. It is interesting to note that Miller refused to use the term chapbook when referring to his own works, instead using a terminology, which denoted the number of pages, the booklet contained. The chap literature Miller printed varied in content from accounts of hurricanes, earthquakes, and the usual assortment of prophesies, to the more bawdy favorites like *The Laird of Cool’s Ghost*, Alexander Montgomerie’s *The Cherrie and the Slae*, and Dougal Graham’s *Comical Sayings of Paddy From Cork*.<sup>16</sup> Miller, however, was to spend only a short

---

<sup>14</sup>Letter of Hannah More to Zachary Macaulay, Jan. 1796, in William Roberts, *Memoir of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 4 vols. (London, 1833), II, 458. Henceforth More.

<sup>15</sup>Examples of the tracts produced by the Edinburgh Religious Tract Society can be found in a bound volume entitled, *Religious Tracts*, (nd), NLS. NF.704.

<sup>16</sup>See William James Couper, *The Millers of Haddington, Dunbar and Dunfermline: A Record of Scottish Bookselling* (London, 1914), pp. 281-3. Henceforth Millers. Apart from

time filling the hawker's basket as he began to question the effects of what he saw as immoral literature upon its readers (Millers, p. 83). By 1802 Miller had decided to quit the chapbook trade and instead turned to using his press as a vehicle for moral reform, undertaking:

a plan which he deemed would preserve all the good such popular literature was fitted to do, and at the same time destroy the tendencies for evil that lurked in its wide distribution (Miller, p. 83).

Miller set about developing a series of booklets similar to the chap literature in style and form but more religious and moral in character. Between 1802 and 1804 he published twenty such cheap tracts, "calculated to promote the interests of Religion, Virtue and Humanity."<sup>17</sup> Miller later wrote that his motive for publishing:

that multitudinous host of Tracts in so cheap and humble a form, was, in order to counteract the dangerous tendency of that noxious description, which were then so abundantly scattered about the country, though the medium of what has been so emphatically styled, that copious source of mischief, the Hawker's Basket (*Latter Struggles*, p. 49).

Tales like *Maria, or the Wanderer Reclaimed and the Fatal Effects of Guilty Love* and *The Magdalen, or the History of a Reformed Prostitute* were specifically designed to save the young from lives of vice (Saunders, p. 252). Others, such as *An Antidote to Superstition; or a Cure for Those Weak Minds which are troubled with the Fear of Ghosts, Witches, &c.*, and *Counsels to Young Men*, were developed specifically to counteract a number of the chapbooks Miller himself had published.<sup>18</sup> The tracts appear to have been relatively successful, each attaining a sale of about 3,000 copies.<sup>19</sup> Many would later reappear in his most successful venture, the *Cheap Magazine*.

---

these well-known favorites Miller also produced a variety of chapbooks containing a wide variety of popular songs.

<sup>17</sup>George Miller, *Latter Struggles in the Journey of Life; or, The Afternoon of My Days* (Edinburgh, 1833), p. 48. Henceforth *Latter Struggles*.

<sup>18</sup>Miller suggests that the popularity of both *The Laird of Cool's Ghost* and *The Witty Sayings of George Buchanan*, two longtime favorites of the chapbook trade, had greatly declined in his neighborhood as a result of the tracts he published (*Latter Struggles*, p. 50.)

<sup>19</sup>This figure, totaling 60,000 copies, is given in Millers, p. 87. Saunders, however, suggests that when bound editions are taken into consideration the figure was upwards of 100,000 (p. 252). For a complete list of the tracts Miller produced see *Latter Struggles*, p. 49.



Miller's new experiment into cheap literature was much broader in scope than any of his earlier attempts. In the announcement of the magazine's publication, it was described as a work consisting

Of interesting, instructive, and amusing stories or narratives; anecdotes, memoirs, essays, letters; suitable meditations and reflections; maxims and advices for the conduct of life; useful hints, economical receipts, valuable discoveries, important information; short extracts from books and sermons of merit; with occasional pieces of poetry, & c. The whole adapted to the lowest capacity: calculated to promote the interests of **Religion**, **Virtue**, and **Humanity**, and dispel the shades of **Ignorance**, **Prejudice**, and **Error** from among the lower classes of mankind.<sup>20</sup>

Initially the magazine enjoyed a high level of success, reaching an impressive circulation of 21,000 copies.<sup>21</sup> However, this early success was due not so much to any specific qualities that the monthly possessed, as to a clever bit of advertising. As early as the summer of 1812 Miller distributed a circular soliciting the aid of ministers who then made their parish populations aware of the publication.<sup>22</sup> Initially this proved to be extremely beneficial, however, as this support declined the magazine's circulation also fell, forcing Miller to discontinue the work after only two years.

Finding evidence for an opposition towards popular literature amongst the educational reformers and publishers active in the cheap literature movement in the 1820s and 1830s is much more difficult than in the preceding period, yet the evidence is there. Archibald Constable, the "Napoleon of Print," wrote in 1826 that he hoped to cleanse the book trade with his *Miscellany*, the success of which will

I trust, have a beneficial effect in cutting off the trash which, in the shape of books, is now circulated by persons without either character or good principles all over the

---

<sup>20</sup>William Mavor quoted in the "Preface" to the *Cheap Magazine* (Haddington, 1813), v.

<sup>21</sup>Couper, *Millers of Haddington*, pp. 120-121; Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), p. 320

<sup>22</sup>See the "Circular for the Cheap Magazine," dated Haddington, Sept. 1812, in George Miller, *Portion of Autobiography*. NLS. Mss. 5409. A good example of the role some ministers played in popularizing the work is provided by James Stirling, the minister of the Presbytery of Dunbar, who wrote that "the Presbytery of Dunbar, having seen the plan and prospectus of this work (the Cheap Magazine) are of the opinion that if properly conducted it may be highly useful in promoting moral and religious instruction; and having read and considered the first number, which was lately published, they recommend it to all with whom they are connected, as having a happy tendency to enlighten the minds of the lower classes of the community, and lead them to practice of personal and relative duties." As quoted in the preface to the first number of the *Cheap Magazine*. p. iv.

country, and who not unfrequently lend their influence in promoting the sale of cheap books to corrupt men's minds and create mischief.<sup>23</sup>

The SDUK, which as an organization had devoted itself to the dissemination of cheap literature amongst the masses, can be seen as being in opposition to popular forms of literature, and working-class culture in general. The treatises they produced were primarily scientific in nature and ill suited for the education of those for which they professed to cater. Criticism fell upon the Society from all sides as it was clear they were out of touch with the realities of working-class life. They professed dedication to the education of the working man, but it was an education designed in middle-class terms. One writer for the *Westminster Review* lashed out at the Society for failing to examine what mode of instruction best suited those they purported to target. The author argued that the committee were either "totally ignorant of the people to whom they were addressing themselves, or if they were not so ignorant, they were totally incapable of judging of what was required to instruct them."<sup>24</sup> The best example of this comes from the same writer who points out that while the laborers were breaking machines and burning ricks the Society, "offered as matter of instruction two treatises...one on the Polarization of Light, and another on the Rigidity of Cordage" (Society, p. 372).

Other individuals closely linked to, or within, the Society itself, openly demonstrated their antagonism towards the lower classes. One writer protested against the amusing nature of the "Entertaining Knowledge" series in the hope that the Society would not "condescend to cater for drones or incurable block-heads."<sup>25</sup> Another, this time a member of the publications committee itself, while attending a preliminary meeting on the establishment of the *Penny Magazine*, is said by Knight to have repeated again and again, "it is very awkward."<sup>26</sup> The Society was therefore comprised of a number of individuals either openly antagonistic towards the working class, or completely ignorant of working-class culture.

The one series produced by the SDUK, which stands out as being part of a direct effort to destroy popular literature, was *The British Almanac*, the brain-child of Charles Knight, the principal publisher of the SDUK and pioneer of

---

<sup>23</sup>Letter of Archibald Constable to Sir Walter Scott, in Thomas Constable, *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondence*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1873), III, 309.

<sup>24</sup>"Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Instituted January 1827," *Westminster Review*. April, 1831. 373. Henceforth Society.

<sup>25</sup>As quoted in Smith, "Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge," p. 10.

<sup>26</sup>Charles Knight, *Passages of a Working Life*, 3 vols. (London, 1864), II, 180-81. Henceforth Knight.

the cheap literature movement (Knight, II, 60-63). Struck by the popularity of the Stationers Company Almanacs, Knight undertook an examination of all such literature appearing for the year 1827. Finding them all to be of a very debased, immoral nature he asked himself how

could any reader of this day imagine that in the year when the London University was opened, and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was beginning its work, he could find these lines at the head of an almanac's calendar for January:

If it don't snow  
I don't care.  
But if it freezes  
It may as it pleases  
And then I sneezes,  
And my nose blow. (Knight, II, 61).

He immediately formulated a scheme to produce a rational and useful almanac through the auspices of the SDUK. He approached the Society's chairman, Henry Brougham, who in typical fashion rushed through a plan of action. Within two months of this date the first issue of the *British Almanac* was in circulation (Knight, II, 63).

The venture proved a success but had stiff competition from a plethora of unstamped almanacs in circulation. In 1833 Knight conducted a study of the sale of unstamped almanacs and found that they were "hawked about the towns and villages, and openly as well as privately sold in shops" (Knight, II, 65). Scotland, he found, had a much larger trade than England; although he adds that here "the trade was conducted with more regard to the morals and intelligence of the people" (Knight, II, 65). Knight's investigation into the unstamped trade had a considerable impact upon the popular almanac. Armed with this findings Knight was able to prepare a report, which directly leads to the total repeal of the Almanac Duty. This allowed the SDUK's *British Almanac* to compete more fairly, as the advantage held by the unstamped trade had been removed. One writer, for the most part highly critical of the Society, could still find something good to say about the organization when he stated, "By their almanacks, the Society has gone far to extinguish a mass of trumpery, that was a disgrace to the country" (Society, p. 390).

Even William and Robert Chambers, who of all the people associated with the cheap literature movement best understood the working classes and their literature, could state with some pride that their newly formed *Edinburgh Journal* had caused all the other cheap papers issued in Edinburgh immediately

to disappear.<sup>27</sup> In 1835 the *Journal* published an account of a bookseller who said Chambers

has done what others could not do, not even the Tract Societies... Not many years ago, I drew £30 annually for trashy ballads, and still more trashy pamphlets, such as John Cheap the Chapman, Paddy from Cork, &c... I no longer keep such trash in my shop... Chambers has done more to wean the people from trash, cultivate their minds, and excite curiosity, than all the Tract Societies that ever existed.<sup>28</sup>

Such evidence would suggest that the Chambers's, the SDUK and others involved in the production and dissemination of cheap literature had achieved their goals.

Numerous nineteenth-century authors believed the chapbook had greatly declined in popularity by mid-century, and further attributed their downfall to the new periodicals in circulation. As early as 1825 Allan Cunningham wrote "that those little copies have vanished before the influence of a more fleeting literature."<sup>29</sup> Writing in 1873 John Fraser would note that chapbooks continued in circulation

till early in the present century, when the introduction of cheap and wholesome literature effected naturally, quietly, and efficiently a reform which...drove the coarser chap-books across the border, where they found refuge in Newcastle and the North of England. By this, it is not meant that these publications were abolished. They are still circulated in large numbers throughout the country, but the more indecent have been weeded out, and almost all of them have been expurgated and revised, while their sale is becoming yearly more circumscribed and limited (Fraser, pp. 113-4).

Writing somewhat later, William Harvey would set the end of the chapbook period at 1830, the chief reason being "the introduction of other literature of a cheap kind...little calculated to offend public taste in the way the broad publications of Graham had done, or, rather, were beginning to do."<sup>30</sup>

We can easily assume that the efforts of the Religious Tract Societies must have had an impact upon chap literature simply from the sheer number of tracts being produced: Hannah More produced 114 of her Cheap Repository Tracts

---

<sup>27</sup>William Chambers, *Memoir of William and Robert Chambers* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 234.

<sup>28</sup>*Chamber's Journal*, (1835), IV, 1; (1833), II, 296.

<sup>29</sup>As quoted in John Fraser, *The Humorous Chap-Books of Scotland*, Part 1 (New York, 1873), 6. Henceforth Fraser.

<sup>30</sup>William Harvey, *Scottish Chapbook Literature* (New York, 1903), p. 26.

over a three-year period, of which over two million copies were sold in the first year alone; and by the end of the nineteenth century the Stirling Tract Enterprise, which was a worldwide concern, was producing no less than 25 million tracts a year.<sup>31</sup> However, the religious tracts were not easily disseminated; they were often literally forced into the hands of the poor, and as one writer has most amusingly noted, their producers had to quickly learn to print them on a “stiffish pastel-coloured paper...to discourage use for sanitary purposes” (Donaldson, p. 204).

George Miller confidently believed that both his tracts and the *Cheap Magazine* had done much to cleanse the hawker’s basket. In at least one case that we know of this was true. One of the most famous of Scottish chapmen, William Cameron, better known as Hawkie, found himself in Dunfermline and in need of material. He relates that he

went to a bookseller’s named Miller, for ballads or histories, but he had nothing but tracts. These were a **bad fit**, but the drink being in the ‘garret’ I took four dozen of them, went into the street, and began a long story. I soon gathered an audience, who relished the story, and many bought.<sup>32</sup>

So here we have proof of some four dozen of Miller’s tracts being disseminated by a chapman. However, the story does not end here. The long tale Hawkie was telling was not exactly what he was selling—in fact it was completely different. One of the buyers became quite upset with his purchase and demanded his half-penny back. The whole affair ended with Hawkie keeping the half-penny but spending the weekend in jail. Clearly the hawkers found the trace literature and a last resort.

Miller claimed that he had sold upwards of 60,000 copies of his Cheap Tracts, yet would later write that there was no incentive financially to proceed and that Henry Duncan, who was doing a similar work in Dumfriesshire, had met with the same disappointment. The conclusion we must then come to is that while there was a large body of this type of literature in circulation, it was doing little in the way of effectively reforming the chap literature. Apart from the *Penny Magazine*, the literature produced by the SDUK was far too scientific and expensive for any but the more well-off clerk or mechanic. Only the Chambers’s *Edinburgh Journal*, which a number of early writers saw as spell-

---

<sup>31</sup>See Donaldson. For more on Hannah More’s Cheap Repository Tracts, see Harold Gordon Spinney, “Cheap Repository Tracts,” *The Library*, 4<sup>th</sup> Series, XX, 3 (1939), 295-304. Henceforth Repository Tracts.

<sup>32</sup>William Cameron, *Hawkie: The Autobiography of a Gangrel*, ed. John Strathesk. (Glasgow, 1888), p. 57.

ing the end of the chapbook,<sup>33</sup> had the potential to impact upon the chapbooks' popularity, and this not so much from any program of moral reform as from the fact that of all the periodicals produced after 1794, Chambers's was the only one which included material of an entertaining nature. Despite this fact, by 1840 William Chambers still had to admit that the journal was not reaching as far down the social scale as was once thought, and therefore may not have had the impact that was previously believed.

How then do we account for the decline of the chapbook and other forms of popular literature during this period? To begin, it must be stated that many forms of popular literature such as the broadside remained popular throughout the nineteenth century. As well, a host of new periodicals catering to working class tastes came into being. However, it is clear that some forms of popular literature, particularly the chapbook, did decline in popularity after 1830. In order to understand why this happened we have to look at the larger changes taking place in Scottish society during the early nineteenth century. The rise of the novel as a predominant form of literature played an important role, as did the newspaper press, which dominated the market after the repeal of the stamp duty in 1855. The expansion of the school system was significant as a more literate population demanded different types of reading material. Perhaps the most significant factors of all were the innovations in transportation. The chapman dominated during a period when coaches were expensive, roads were poor and railways thought an impossibility. The chapman was therefore a necessary figure who provided isolated communities with the necessary articles of everyday life, including a good story. With the development of new systems of transportation their role increasingly diminished and with them the popularity of the chapbook.

*University of Guelph*

---

<sup>33</sup>George MacGregor would write that after 1832 *Chambers's Journal* had taken the place of the chapbook amongst the literature of the people. See *The Collected Works of Dougal Graham*, ed. George MacGregor, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1883), I, 77.