



by Jim  
McBeth

**H**IS noble father had wanted a golden child, a lissom lad to grace the playing fields of Eton – but James Douglas was a disappointment. At the age of nine, he was an ugly, hulking imbecile with a devious disposition and extremely strange dietary tastes.

So the Duke of Queensberry incarcerated his son in a 'playroom'. It may seem cruel today, but His Grace felt it was his duty to prevent the young Earl of Drumlanrig from eating any of the servants or, even worse, a member of the family.

Sadly his efforts to ensure public safety would fail in January 1707, on the day when the Scottish Parliament and the Duke, as one of the architects of the Union of Scotland and England, ratified the historic legislation. On his way home, the Duke had been abused by the Edinburgh mob, but when he arrived at his mansion in the Canongate he was greeted by the comforting smell of meat cooking.

The aroma lured him to the kitchen... and there, by the oven fire, sat his monstrous son, turning the spit on which he had skewered the body of the kitchen boy. The scullion had been roasting long enough for James to have eaten parts of him.

'I think political historians might have overlooked this episode,' says Geoff Holder, who has gathered together a plethora of dreadful tales of murder and mayhem in the capital.

They demonstrate that dastardly deeds in Auld Reekie did not begin and end with that 18th-century rogue Deacon William Brodie and the 19th-century killing spree of grave-robbing Burke and Hare. Edinburgh's past has more secrets than are to be found behind the twitching lace curtains of Morningside.

'Queensberry's cannibal kid takes some beating,' adds Mr Holder, a chronicler of the weird and wonderful in Scotland. 'James had not turned out quite as his father wished. He was psychopathic, huge for his age and inordinately strong.'

'He was kept locked up, his only human contact being a valet who was somehow able to control this "child". James was out of sight and out of mind – until the day when Queensberry led the Parliament in ratifying the Union. His support for it had made him unpopular with the Edinburgh mob and, on his way home, he was in danger.'

**S**O James's valet, fearing for the master's life, went to his aid – allowing the deranged boy to get out. James murdered the kitchen lad and roasted him. The poor cookboy was cooking away quite nicely when Queensberry returned.'

The mad, cannibal child was dispatched to his father's estate in Yorkshire, where he was incarcerated until his death at the age of 17. 'And there's a twist,' says Mr Holder. 'The fire over which the scullion was roasted can still be seen in the Donald Dewar writing room of the Scottish parliament.'

Another strange tale is that of Jean Livingstone who, in 1600, married a bad man by the name of John Kincaid of Wallacetown.

He would bite and beat the 21-year-old beauty, a spirited woman who resolved to end the torment.

She enlisted her parents' servants, notably Robert Weir, who had known her since childhood and was a more than willing champion. He went to the Kincaid mansion at midnight and was admitted by the abused woman, who guided him to her husband's bedchamber – where the brute

# MURDER AND MAYHEM IN THE CITY WHERE THE STREETS RAN WITH BLOOD



Dark city:  
Edinburgh  
has many  
a guilty  
secret in its  
past, such as  
the murders  
committed  
by the  
unsavory  
Burke and  
Hare, left

was bludgeoned. Within days, 'justice' caught up with Jean. She was arrested, tried and condemned.

'Her family could do nothing about her sentence but they could minimise the scandal by having her killed in secret,' says Holder.

Executions in Edinburgh were normally carried out in the Grassmarket in the afternoon, but Jean's family arranged for her to be beheaded at 4am in the Canongate. Meanwhile, several servants who colluded with her – with the exception of Weir, who escaped – were strangled and burned at Castlehill.

'The rationale was that people would be attracted to the flames and ignore the beheading of Jean,' says Mr Holder. 'It worked.'

Weir would remain at large for four years before suffering a horrible death thanks to James VI. The King, angry over the 'lawlessness' of his realm, had decreed that miscreants should suffer by being 'broken on the wheel', a method of execution imported from Germany.

Bounded to a cartwheel, Weir's arms and legs were broken and he was left to die. Such gory sights were street theatre in 17th-century Edinburgh, where several severed heads would be on display at any given time.

In more modern times, Edinburgh's killers favoured poison, although in at least two cases the perpetrators were not the brightest buttons in the box. William Bennison, a merchant in the city, was a case in point. In 1850, Bennison took a fancy to a woman from Paisley and

decided to marry. But unfortunately he was already married... to a woman who promptly disappeared without trace. There is no doubt that he killed her.

Bennison then married the Paisley girl and fathered a daughter. But he was a fickle lover who soon turned to another paramour.

Emboldened by getting away with murder once, and reasoning that sudden death was a quicker than divorce, he bought arsenic and served it to his second spouse in her porridge.

She died three days later – but Bennison had inadvertently left some poisoned porridge in a pot, which was eaten by his dog. The animal also died, raising the suspicions of neighbours and the constabulary.

**A**POST-MORTEM examination of his wife's exhumed body revealed its secret, and a High Court jury took five minutes to find him guilty. Several days later, a crowd of 20,000 gathered to witness his hanging.

Much later, in 1911, an Edinburgh chemist called John Hutchison also favoured arsenic – but he had even fewer brains than Bennison. Middle-class but on his uppers, he decided to bump off his well-to-do parents and inherit their fortune.

As well as being stupid, he showed a remarkable lack of good taste by deciding to kill them at the party for their 50th

wedding anniversary, for which he promised to provide post-prandial coffee made from the finest beans. On the day, he brewed it laced it with arsenic.

Within minutes, his parents and 15 guests were lying on the floor. Two of them, one being his mother, died. And the combination of so many people becoming suddenly ill, coupled with the fact that Hutchison was a chemist, was too much of a coincidence for the powers-that-be.

**I**N order to escape justice he fled to the Channel Islands where, as the subject of a nationwide manhunt, he was soon recognised. When detectives arrived on Guernsey to arrest him, the poisoner avoided the gallows by swallowing the remains of the arsenic.

'At least he saved the public purse the cost of the trial,' says Mr Holder.

Not so Major John Weir, Commander of the Town Guard. Until he was revealed as a sexual monster, the pious Weir's claim to fame was overseeing the execution for treason in 1650 of the Duke of Montrose. As a fanatical Covenanter, Weir relished his task and ensured that Great Montrose's last days were hellish.

But at the age of 76, the pillar of society would go to a gory end himself after his secret life was exposed. The cruel, intolerant Covenanter might boast that he could recite every word of scripture, but he was not thinking of the Bible when he abused a ten-year-old relative.

His crimes also included forcing his wife's young daughter from a previous marriage into a sexual relationship. Eventually, when his double life was exposed, he was flung into jail, where all his services to the city were not enough to save him from paying the ultimate penalty.

'His last words before he was strangled and burned were: "I have lived like a beast, I shall die like a beast,"' says Mr Holder. 'He was not the first or last beast to walk Edinburgh's streets.'

● *Bloody Scottish History: Edinburgh, by Geoff Holder, The History Press, £9.99.*



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