

(Robt1)

## The Boy

In his old age, Robert Chambers began an autobiography. He had written about his life before, in stilted and pedantic language in his thirties, but at sixty five he let his mind and pen ramble back to his childhood in a gentler and more relaxed way. He was ill with anaemia (wrongly diagnosed as brain damage from overwork); old before his time, and with an old man's clarity of memory for the far past. In his retirement home in St Andrews he looked back to the near Eden of his first eleven years. His memory was always phenomenal, and these years were stamped even more firmly on his mind because of what happened afterwards. His handwriting is tired but the picture he paints of Peebles at the beginning of the century is tender, vivid, funny and wonderfully alive.

He is a boy again; before the crash that ended his childhood; before the humiliations and disappointments of Edinburgh; before the bookstall on Leith Walk, the meeting with Sir Walter Scott, the watchful wanderings about the streets to collect material for his first book **Traditions of Edinburgh** before he met Anne his wife; before he and William his brother launched their **Edinburgh Journal** and became overnight rich and famous; before all the children and all the work, the endless work writing for the **Journal**, and all the other ventures he and William launched; before he began to realise that science was his real love, particularly geology, and wanted desperately to disentangle himself from his other commitments to devote himself to its study; before he and William started to quarrel, before he began to think he was going mad, before he was persuaded to take a rest in St Andrews, where he wrote the book he hoped would change the course of his life; before he realised he was not going to be taken seriously and relinquished his dream; before the last sad years when his children left home, Anne declined and died, his health deteriorated and he became one of his own characters "The Old Gentleman who Pops About"; a frail pensioner, filling in his days as best he could, sustained by his now absolute conviction in spiritualism.

As he sat down to write about Peebles he brought to bear on his memories a mind still sharp, even though the body flagged, the blood thinned. He could relax now, there was nobody to impress, no deadline to keep for the **Journal** or any other of the array of publications he and William had launched; no money to earn. He was a very rich man with little time left to live, and he could write as he wished, for no particular reason except to describe, before it was too late, what he knew to be a world that was almost lost; except to remember, and become warm with the memory, the only happy period of his childhood.

There is no record of the emotions of James and Jean Chambers at the birth of their second son on July 10th 1802. They must have felt a slight sinking of the spirits to notice that the baby had six fingers and toes like his brother William, two years his senior. There were ways of dealing with this congenital deformity, but in Robert's case they were not very successful, and the botched operation on his feet was to play an important part in his life. Their home was a solid stone house by the banks of a small stream, Eddlestone Water, and when the minister came to christen the baby they all had a good laugh about the time three years before when James and Jean had to appear before him and the elders at the Kirk Sessions, and be reproved and mildly punished (a temporary removal of their communion tokens) for their clandestine marriage in Edinburgh.

The reason for this "elopement" was the unlikelihood of Jean's guardians approving of her marriage to James Chambers. She was young, and apparently had several other suitors with more to offer, but they would have taken her away from Peebles, so her mother conspired with the young couple to take a postchaise to the city, and there without banns or witnesses become man and wife. Why they chose what was considered the unlucky month of May does not emerge, but they apparently started quite a vogue, several other couples following their example. These clandestine marriages were usually conducted by evicted Episcopalians trying to scrape a living. The Reverend Moodie of St Andrews Church married them.

James Chamber's father William had died the year before, but had built his son a house to start his married life, whether to this wife or another is not mentioned. His mother was alive, but not Anne's father William Gibson, so the only parents involved in the deal were Robert's two grandmothers. Jean and her brother William had guardians to watch over their interests when their mother remarried, and they must have been reconciled to the marriage because they handed over to her the patrimony of £250 which allows her son to refer to her as an "heiress."

According to a memorial written later by Robert's sister Janet, William and Jean's stepfather, the schoolmaster Noble, was unkind to them, and favoured his own two children, this in spite of the fact that he was paid £12 a year towards their keep. Certainly they were sent to board in Peebles, but the stepfather died after three years and then perhaps things became easier for them. William Gibson enlisted, married a Manchester girl, was designated "weaver" in Glasgow in 1802 and died in 1855. The Gibsons played little part in Robert's life, though his Noble grandmother and her surviving son seem to have been helped financially by him according to a diary entry.

William Chambers senior was from a family of woollen merchants, but wisely had seen the emergence of cotton as the cloth of the future and had sent his son James to Glasgow to learn its manufacture. James was bitter about this; he was a scholar, who wanted to pursue a classical education (his bent was scientific, but classics were considered a safer bet, even though Edinburgh university boasted a superb physics and chemistry department) but the minister had persuaded his father against it. Perhaps the pair of them thought a thriving cotton dealer was likely to be happier than a poor churchman or schoolmaster. James was not a businessman, however. He was passionately fond of music, of astronomy, of reading and intellectual talk. He ended up a poor, indeed destitute ex cotton merchant. His career was a minor, but familiar, tragedy of the times. His son Robert suffered more than anyone else as a result, but inherited from his failed father the curious mind and the love of music, and an agreeably equable temperament which apparently had made James Chambers a great favourite in Peebles.

His mother Jean Gibson's family were tenant farmers. On the hill opposite Needpath Castle (now a tourist attraction, then the property of the raffish absentee Earl of March, later Duke of Queensbury) a farmer called David Grieve reared fourteen children on rented land at a lease of £18 a year. The eldest daughter Janet was married at eighteen to forty eight year old William Gibson, who rented an extensive pasturage, seven miles long and carrying two thousand sheep. This land, called Newby bordered on Blackhouse in Selkirkshire where James Hogg kept his sheep before he was discovered.

It was common for young girls to be paired with middle aged men; indeed they were considered lucky to step into settled property and an assured income. How lucky Jean's mother thought herself one will never know; often there were younger men who held the hearts of these rather helpless girls, as many plaintive songs testify. William Gibson may have been considered a good catch, but his house was a "but and ben" and his wife had to rise with the dawn to help milk the ewes; there were so many of these that cheese was made every day. Like most of the better off farmers of the day, his house was a staging post to the army of vagrants always adrift in Scotland. At weekends they would feed and shelter as many as they could take in, and Robert paints the cosy scene; the men (including their poor visitors) smoking and talking round a fire at one end of the room, the women spinning at the other end. It was a camaraderie that was classless and on its way out.

Newby was rented from a Dr Hay, and his wife and sisters were taken with the new, pretty intelligent mistress of the place, Robert's grandmother. They invited her to accompany them to church, and called on her, though it is not recorded that she went to see them in the Big House. The Misses Hay were also spinners, but of lint, apparently a more refined form of the skill. Strangely they ended their days in an apartment in West Nicholson Street in Edinburgh, which is where the luckless Chambers family also found themselves after the crash. The tall Edinburgh tenements or "lands" harboured a mixture of people, some genteel like the Misses Hay, many desperate like James and Jean Chambers. The floors they lived on pointed to their status.

The marriage took place in 1868, and the first two children died; no record is available of miscarriages of course. It was in 1780 that Jean appeared on the scene, followed by brother William. Soon after William senior retired to a house he had built in Peebles, and not long after that died, leaving his still young wife with two small children to rear. She remarried the schoolmaster Noble, and had two more children. As was common, a "tutor" or guardian undertook to help her with the first fatherless family, and records show the boy and girl getting schooling, music and dancing classes included. For one year they boarded in Peebles, taking with them their own coals and candles.

In his memoir Robert says his mother was seventeen when she was married, but records show her to be nineteen, her husband James seven years older. In their new, solid house by the waterside, with a good business established (however unwillingly) by James; a hundred weavers working for him as agent for two cotton distributors in Glasgow; life looked secure. When their son William was born in 1800 with six fingers and toes it was not a disaster. Clouds on the horizon were only hand sized. Napoleon and his plans and threats worried even the far flung inhabitants of the sleepy border town; worrying too were the cotton mills at nearby New Lanark where Robert Owen was using Arkwright's water driven power looms and hugely undercutting hand spinners and weavers.

"There was an old and a new town in Peebles, each of them a single street, or little more; and as even the New Town had an antique look, it may be inferred that the Old looked old indeed. It was indeed chiefly composed of thatched cottages, occupied by weavers and labouring people - a primitive simple race, of the most homely aspect." The Chambers house was in this Old Town, and still stands, though the thatched cottages are gone and a council estate fills in the empty meadows that were behind it.

Robert took his first steps on the grassy banks of Eddleston water, and his first memory is of his

three year old self carrying a bucket of wet mud to help an older companion in building a castle on the village street; the muddy lanes were wonderful playgrounds for pre school children, though the incidence of tetanus is not known; cows, sheep, carters horses also used them, and the dung deposited was eagerly scooped up by old ladies with buckets and used for fuel.

The villagers who lived in the cottages, benignly remembered forty five years later, were very poor, but it was a shared poverty in a society where very few were rich. Many of them owned a cow, and a rig of potatoes, there was free fuel for the gathering, and the wheels spun the cloth for them to wear. Robert remembered the wooden bowls of porridge cooling on the window sills, the smell of peat, the old men smoking in the evenings, seated on the stone benches in front of the houses and talking of Napoleon, while the cows trailed past on their return from the pastures, and the children played marbles or shinty or hide and seek and Miss Ritchie opened her tavern and filled her jugs of toddy for the evening.

Of course these weavers and day labourers were, in fact, living in hovels and the old, the sick, the widowed or disabled had to rely on the scant resources of the parish to survive, and were put through a sort of means test by the elders in order to claim the most meagre assistance. Robert remembered a destitute widow, the mother of his nurse, who was unable to claim help because a visiting elder found she had two cats and counted these as "dependents" which debarred her from the church's largess. The spinning and weaving work they were able to do in their homes was often all there was between poverty and destitution, which made the collapse of this cottage industry an absolute disaster.

Robert wandering as a child into the houses of his neighbours, remembered buttered oatcakes, the butter spread with the thumb. Box beds took up much of the living space, and the only utensils were of wood or horn, the food a soup of kail with oatmeal dumplings. On Sundays the families emerged for church, the man "with a long backed, swing tailed light blue coat of the style of George II, which was probably his marriage coat and half a century old. His head gear was a broad brimmed bonnet. The old women came out on the same occasions, in red scarfs, called Cardinals, and white sharp-prowed mutches (caps) with the grey hair folded back on the forehead and underneath bound by a black ribbon." Any other coloured ribbon was thought to be frivolous, and would earn a rebuke from the elders. "There was a great deal of druggie, and huckaback and serge in that old world, and very little of cotton." Children wore corduroy and except in the coldest weather went barefoot; otherwise their footwear was clogs.

There were gradations of poverty; some of the weavers could earn as much as two pounds a week (£200 today) and were in fact well off and their ranks contained "many young men of good connections." Their wealth was expressed in silver watches and chains, which fascinated the young Robert when they came on a Saturday morning to collect fresh webs or supplies of weft, and get paid for their last weeks work. The writing was already on the wall for handweavers, but at this time they only dimly saw it. An invasion by the bogeyman Bonaparte seemed more of a real threat in Peebles.

Robert's father was higher up on the social ladder, one of the "middle class" employers, on a level with the more prosperous shopkeepers, better off farmers, the "lairds" who owned a bit of property however small, the schoolmasters, the ministers, the doctor. From this stratum was elected the provost and his baillies, who provided the administrative body for the burgh. It was not a clearly defined social

system; it was a sort of bland commonwealth in fact, within which there was room for manoeuvre and a great deal of eccentricity. It was remarkably crime free, perhaps because there was little of material value to steal. The hangman, who was paid on a piece work basis, did very badly. A whipping was a real windfall for him.

Robert's house, although situated in the Old Town amongst labourers cottages, was vastly superior. Although it had "a ground floor full of looms, and a garret full of webs and weft" the centre of the house boasted a "tastefully furnished parlour" in which the bed was concealed; how he does not say, tucked into an alcove most likely, with a curtain in front. The parlour was carpeted, since one of his earliest memories was playing marbles with his brother William on the carpet while recovering from measles. There were several other small rooms, including a kitchen; they must have been very small, because the house still stands and by today's standards the idea of a family of six living on one of its floors is hard to envisage.

Robert remembered an alabaster clock on the mantelpiece and under it a coloured picture of a negro in chains kneeling, and a bubble from his mouth proclaiming "Britannia set me free." Above were two circular alabaster framed pictures to match, one depicting Pope's villa at Twickenham, the Thames in front complete with swans; the other, his favourite, of a woodman walking through a winter scene. There was also a print of a shepherd boy, with a verse attached;

"See the shepherds cheerful air,  
Neath his looks serene and mild.  
Grateful love is painted there -  
Simple natures happy child."

Pictures are particularly potent in childhood; an ability, afterwards lost, to enter into them, to walk with that woodman and sail with those swans, makes them unforgettable. The Chambers family spent their time together in the parlour, and even managed to squeeze in an impoverished relative for spells, who sat by the fire and told the children folktales and ballads. Cramped though it was by present standards, it was spacious and quite luxurious for Peebles at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

For the small boy Robert, it represented a stability, a solidity that he lost at eleven and did not find again for twenty five years; indeed it is not too fanciful to ponder if he ever really recovered the sense of security he had known as he flicked his marbles across that parlour carpet. His pretty young mother, his kind and cheerful father; "a neatly made rather short man in the prime of life, a handsome cast of face and a cheerful intelligent look; much given to reading and to music, being a tolerable performer on the German flute, fond of scientific conversation, kindly to children and to everybody" completed the picture. His nurse Nanny Hunter, she with the destitute mother, was the prototype comfortable Scottish minder; one of his grandmothers, his father's mother, was a "character", one of the many he recalled with humorous tenderness.

There was Laird Baird for instance, an elderly Covenanter; "His secular business consisted in thatching houses; his inner life was a constant brooding over the sins of a perjured and sinful nation." All that had gone wrong he traced to "an outraged deity" who was punishing the nation for laying aside the Solemn League and Covenant. Napoleon was one of God's punishments, as he explained to young

Jean Chambers as she stood in front of her door one evening, with William in her arms. If the French arrived, what would she do he demanded? Fly to the Pentland hills no doubt, but instead she should pray that they should come, "Ye should pray for joodgments woman - joodgments on a sinfu' land" he told her, "pray that the lord may pour out the vials of his wrath upon us." This was a sentiment shared by the minister; one of his sermons is on this topic; Bonaparte was a direct result of the sins of the people of Peebles (and elsewhere) and only their turning away from their errors would keep him from their shores.

Ministers varied; some performed their pastoral duties; others like Dr Dalglish were to be seen staggering home at five in the morning from a roisterous night; one had to be dragged out of a gorse bush where he had passed out, pleading with his rescuers not to let this little lapse ruin his reputation. With their elders they regulated the morals of the community, so lapses of this kind were not helpful. Robert's attitude to the church becomes important later, and it seems that in these early years he was "put off" in various ways. His father James was always bitter about the minister who advised against an academic career for him, and the dreary learning by heart of a catechism he could not understand at school was another source of negative feelings.

Robert's paternal grandmother Margaret was a keen and stern supporter of the church; "she had a good deal of the pugnacious piety of the old fashioned Scotch people," and through her husband the chief elder, was thought to rule the parish, including telling off the minister's wife for wearing the wrong sort of bonnet to church. She it was who, when going to milk the cow early in the morning, saw Dr Dalglish on his wavering progress home; fortunately another seceding minister had set up shop, and she forthwith joined his church, presumably taking her husband the elder with her. Robert writes of her with tolerant amusement, as of a dying species; "To recall her figure as she sat in her cottage home, conversing of fate, fixed fate, free will, and foreknowledge absolute, couching everything she did with texts, seems to me like looking across some prodigious gulf dividing my own generation from the very fierce gens mortalium." Years later in a letter he described this grandmother giving him cuffs with one hand and cakes with the other; a suitable model for the church she so staunchly believed in.

The minister and his wife were childless, and Robert's father used to describe to his family the sterile gloom of their house, and the stinginess of their regime. Any evening of the week would find them in the same positions; he at his books, she knitting, and the one maidservant just inside the door spinning, to save a fire in the kitchen; as long as there was sufficient space between them, the closeness of servant and master was permissible. When the mistress went to Edinburgh or anywhere equally distant (about twenty miles) she lay on the sofa for two days before "to rest herself, - a fact which I never heard of in any other person" Robert remarked. The lady may well have suffered from "nerves" or anaemia or some other condition undiagnosed at a time when doctors were guessing wildly about most illnesses. Or she may just have been travel sick.

The minister's chief elder was a cart and wheel wright called Thomas, a genuinely kind and good man, but rigidly pious. A pyramid of holy books, with a Bible at the bottom and a psalm book on top, were taken morning and evening like medicine by the whole family, and on Sunday the entire day, in between services, was spent in digesting them. Thomas acted as chief magistrate in the absence of the provost, and when a strolling theatre company came to perform in Peebles, they went to him to ask permission to use the town hall for their performance. "Thomas was hewing at a log out of doors when

the man approached, and stood with his tool suspended above his head while listening to the request. I'll oppose it with all the means in my poo'er" he exclaimed fiercely, and the petitioner hastily withdrew. "In the hands of men of his kind." Robert wrote, "Christianity did not appear as a religion of love, it seemed almost wholly to consist in an imposition of irksome duties and an abstinence from all natural and allowable enjoyments."

The other elder, whom Robert remembers to have seen sawing with Thomas in his yard, "the elderhood of Peebles engaged at the long saw, Thomas of course being the top Sawyer", was a niggardly character called Davitt. He had a large family and an ailing wife whom he treated with little humanity. She had a weakness for tea, then a special luxury, but Davitt meanly refused to allow it into the house. "It was said that the woman at last managed to take it standing in front of a press on one of the shelves of which the apparatus was arranged, ready to be shut up if her husband should unexpectedly enter the house." With such childhood memories; the cheerless childless minister, the two grim elders, Robert early learnt to see his church as a dour and repressive institution.

Yet there were very devout people in the parish, who were kind, gentle, genuinely good; a mother and daughter called Bet Stewart and Hannah Muir for instance. They had a cupboard at one end of their cottage with a counter and weighing scales in front of it, and sold tea, tobacco, meal and barley as a way of surviving. Hannah's story was sad and not untypical, a saga of sickness and bereavement only too common in pretty villages. When she married, she and her husband moved into a new house, and were immediately smitten with such acute rheumatism that they had to return to their own homes. The husband died, and Hannah was left with a child, no home and no money. What happened to the child Robert does not say, but Hannah settled down with her mother, and "not one querulous word ever passed her lips." The picture of these two gentle resigned and cheerful women remained with Robert for fifty years.

Four or five doors down from the Chambers' house lived James Ritchie, the Piper of Peebles, the last man to hold this almost obsolete office. Pipers had been present in all Scottish towns in the previous century; Alan Ramsay celebrated them in his poems, and one was so well thought of that a statue was erected to him in front of the church. James Ritchie was born in 1741 so was now, Robert said, a very old man (in his late sixties in fact) and had brought up a family of ten in a small thatched cottage on an official salary of £1 a year: figures should be multiplied by one hundred to bring them into line with today's value. He supplemented this sum by playing at weddings and other festivities, and it was the custom to give him small presents at New Year; shillings and sixpences and a dram or two.

Robert remembered him arriving at their house one New Year's day, rather the worse for wear and dressed in his official coat of dark red with his cocked hat a little awry. James Chambers had a soft spot for the piper, and took little four year old Robert to his cottage to visit him and hear him playing the small bagpipe, which was inflated by a pair of bellows under the left arm. "He was fond of rallying my father upon a ridiculous notion he was understood to entertain that the world went round." Science was notably absent from the school curriculum, even supposing the piper had been to school. He died when Robert was five years old, his funeral an occasion imprinted on his memory because he wore at it his first pair of trousers. Boys and girls were dressed alike in their early years, in a smock of cord or serge.

Another elderly neighbour called Kerr did nothing much, living off his brother-in-law, a local minister, though with little sense of gratitude. "What do I get from Mr B - but my meal and my flesh and my coals?" he was wont to ask, a saying that became current in the town when referring to a churlish lack of thankfulness. He was kind to Robert however, and when he found that metal buttons to wear with his new suit were what the small boy craved, he cut off a large one from an old George the Second jacket of his, and sewed it on, "where it shone like a moon, to my infinite delight for many a day." Among these old men neighbours, there was an old woman, a Mrs Scott, thrice widowed and now subsisting on a pension of £20 a year from a post she had once held as housekeeper. How five year old Robert knew this is stranger than how he remembered it for so long; his father had possibly passed on the information, the exact status and means of everyone in the street, indeed in the village was likely to have been common knowledge, or at least guesswork. Mrs Scott was a tall gaunt woman who wore a huge black silk bonnet and "had long prepared her dead clothes, and took care to air them once a month", though why she should worry about wearing unaired attire as a corpse she did not explain.

Mrs Scott was no stranger to sudden death, and this may have explained her forethought. Her second husband was Scott, who came to Peebles with her and started to grow peppermint, an unusual venture but he died suddenly before its success could be established. She then contracted a third and disastrous marriage with a miserly old weaver called William Dods, under the impression that he was rich. Her post as housekeeper in a refined household, her first husband "a near relation of Mr Lindlay Murray, the celebrated grammarian" had left her with a taste for elegance which "met a dreadful check when she entered the house of William Dods" where she could not even enjoy a cup of tea "which had been her mainstay of comfort through all the troubles of life." She tried to please him by eating porridge, but he objected to the cream and butter she used to make it palatable; when he most fortuitously died quite quickly, she could not even bear to keep his name, but resumed that of the peppermint grower. When she got to put on the dead clothes Robert did not know, though he did go back to Peebles quite often as a man.

"The town drummer Will Moffat was almost as curious a relic of old times as Piper Ritchie." He had been in the army, serving in the American war, and wore his old uniform, the red coat with white facings of George II's soldiery. He drummed in front of the magistrates when they performed their offices, but his main occupation was walking up and down the mainstreet, banging away and announcing the letting of grasslands, a sale of furniture, or the arrival of provisions at some shop; advertising later undertaken by the press. Sadly his livelihood was threatened by Clap Meg, an old woman making the same announcements, using a wooden platter and a porridge stick to call peoples attention, and charging a smaller fee.

The piper and the drummer earned little, Charlie Rodgers the hangman was even worse off. The lack of serious crime was partly owing to the vicious sentences imposed; transportation or death for theft. Robert remembered, at the age of twelve, going to a public hanging of two Irishmen who had robbed a Peebles citizen of five and ninepence. The gibbet was erected at the scene of the robbery, and the victims joined the onlookers, "very decorously", in singing the 103rd Psalm before they were strung up. "Oh then my soul bless God the Lord, and all that in me is Be stirred up his holy name to magnify and bless" they all intoned, though how blessed the poor Irishmen felt is questionable. Robert never heard the Psalm again without thinking of "those two examples of our over rigid justice."

The burgh was nominally under the judicial care of seventeen people, but in fact the provost at its head usually dictated its courses. The medical officer, Dr John Reid, was for many years provost, "and it was alleged to be customary at the council board for the inferior men to ask "What does Dr Reid say?" and to give their votes in accordance with that dictum, without further questioning." It would have been hard to find seventeen citizens to equal the doctor in status, and to argue with your superiors spelt trouble. There was always an underlying assumption that the professional men and the heritors or landlords were a kind of cartel, and to irritate one might well lead to a raising of the rents by the other.

Even in Peebles, "there were occasional inlets of Whig light into the dark recesses of the council" as when the provost had persuaded his Town Council to petition parliament for an enquiry into the conduct of the Duke of York. This act of bravado apparently occasioned slight hilarity at Westminster, where members debated as to where exactly was this place called Peebles, and did it in fact exist? Such treatment would have done little to encourage an independent and democratic spirit among the seventeen councillors.

Among the council were the bailies or magistrates, before whom were brought minor offenders;, quarrelling neighbours, tiresome old women who would not move their middens. There was a town officer (who doubled as jailer) who was empowered to bring offenders before the bailie; in the case of boys stealing apples he simply marched them off to the shop where the bailie was serving, and they were summarily sentenced to spend a couple of hours in jail. The procedure was hardly severe, and the jail quite a relaxed sort of place, but they were apparently thought to have been "taught a lesson." Considering how often they were beaten with the wicked two-lash tawse in the schoolroom, this punishment could not have been a severe deterrent.

One of the most bizarre problems for the bailie to solve was that of a kangaroo, which had jumped overboard and caused considerable damage. Why a Peebles man was trying this case, which must have occurred at a port some miles away, is not divulged; nor is the eventual destination of the wretched animal. The bailie was not flustered by the lack of guidelines provided for this eventuality however. "Ye should ha' clippit its wings" he told the owner severely.

Pisty Walker the jailer lived on the premises; he and his wife had the downstairs rooms, prisoners were up on the first floor. Only one lock on their door confined them, and there was a generally relaxed air, as evidenced in the case of Jamie Scott, who escaped without much difficulty when Pisty's wife brought up his morning porridge. He would not have attempted this if his crimes had not included theft from the Provost, and sheep stealing, both of which merited the death penalty. As he was a local man, well known to everyone, escape meant flying the district without means of support, almost a death sentence in itself.

Jamie was a day labourer, who in fact never laboured by day but emerged at night to roam the town, picking up anything that was lying about. Occasionally he removed a sheep, burning its skin after he had killed it so that it could not be identified. This went on for several years; he was suspected but never caught; until eventually a theft was traced to him, and he was locked in Pisty Walker's prison to await trial. Robert was in the garden of his house when he heard shouts of "Scotties broken prison" and saw much rushing about through the snow, but Scottie in his stockinged feet reached the Tweed bridge where a boy was watering a horse, snatched the animal, and was away. He abandoned the horse a few

miles further on and took to his feet; stories of bloodstained footprints in the snow were circulated but no more was heard of him for three weeks.

Then one night a local farmer and his wife were wakened by a tapping at the window. They thought it might be a suitor for one of their serving girls, but as it continued the farmer went to the window and saw the ragged and desperate figure of Scottie, who pleaded with him for food. Being a kindly man he threw out some bread and a blanket, and again there was silence, until in the spring when the farmer went to move some sacks of corn he came across the signs that someone had cleared a space and been camping in his barn, helping himself to hens and eggs. But there was no sign of Scottie. In the end, inevitably, he was caught, tried by the Sheriff at Jedburgh, and transported for sheep stealing. If he had been an Irishman one wonders if Charlie Rodgers the hangman might have celebrated. It obviously gave Peebles a lot to talk about, because of the scarcity of serious crime. They still told stories of the sheep stealer of 1772, who trained his dog to collect the animals he wanted, and bring them quietly to him at night. It was said that when he was hanged his dog was strung up with him, a medieval practice that Robert could not confirm in this case.

The town council, being not overburdened with crime watch, held itself to have one important duty; to manifest loyalty to the throne of Brunswick by constantly and publicly drinking the current king's health. "It seemed that it would take all that a body of magistrates and a town council could do in the way of outward demonstration by drinking of the royal health by three times three at the cross or in the town house...to maintain the reigning family upon the throne." This patriotic duty had been to preserve the first two Georges from Pope and Pretender, and the third from "the sapping influence of French politics."

June 4th, the official royal birthday, needed an enormous effort and the whole town turned out to assist the provost and his council in their vociferous proclamations of loyalty and devotion. "The provost, bailies and councillors met solemnly over wine and cake in the town-hall, in company with all the citizens of any account or importance, and there, with eloquent speeches and vehement exclamations, honoured the loyal toast of the day. At one time they did this in the open street at the Cross, each man flinging his glass over his head after he had emptied it, but latterly it was found more convenient to perform the ceremony within doors, and to spare the crystal." In fact it was not so much the glasses they were worried about, but the obstreperous gangs of boys, who shouted rude remarks and flung dead cats, previously dragged through gutters, in the direction of the august body. A sort of wild licence pervaded the whole day, which had little to do with his Majesty. A minister at Kilmarnock expressed a lot of people's opinions of the reigning house when he prayed for "our puir fulish benighted monarch and his regardless family." A poor lot they may have been, this King clean out of his mind a lot of the time, but the Peebles town council still considered it their duty to keep him in place with their toasts and their fireworks.

The sheer volume of noise that started at dawn, and continued well into the night, was in the nature of letting off steam, young and old exuberantly creating a hubbub that was not normally acceptable; "a continual cracking of rusty pistols and Lilliputian artillery and a flinging of squibs." By dusk everyone was on the street, and small boys continually replenishing their stock of gunpowder at the village shop. It is surprising that gunpowder was available for children, to make into squibs and other fireworks, but there is no record of accidents. It was a sort of Guy Fawkes day, a midsummer celebration only tenuously

connected with the king, and no doubt frowned on by the elders; which probably made it more fun.

The provost and bailies tried to provide themselves with the paraphernalia of status; to emphasise the dignity of their offices by marching to church every Sunday with the drummer and the town officer (alias Pisty Walker the jailer) parading in front of them with halberts (old fashioned weapons, half sword, half axe) and then occupying a special gallery where the rest of the congregation could look up to them. They dined and wined visiting dignitaries at the town's expense, sometimes for days on end, in "a shower of toddy" on some occasions. However they did not abuse their offices as badly as the council of Musselburgh, who held three toddy filled evenings "to deliberate on the question whether there should be a new bell-rope in the town house" and whose evenings at the inn were regularly put down to the town's account.

For all their efforts to promote themselves, the bailies were not in fact obeyed except when it was convenient, and seldom thanked. One of their tasks was to try to keep the streets reasonably clean; particularly to remove the middens, the refuse heaps piled wherever convenient, eventually to be dumped on the potato rigs. It was not that they considered these to be insanitary; "nobody dreamed of such a thing as a connection between dirt and disease"; but because filth was a nuisance in public places, particularly as they were the playgrounds of children. Each new bailie would try to enforce acts of council in this respect, but because this was infringing some "natural right", would get screamed at by the owners of the offending heaps who would flatly refuse to comply with the council's orders.

The trouble was, that in their other hats; those of baker, carpenter, watch mender, cobbler, grocer, they were ordinary citizens of the place, converging of an evening at Miss Ritchie's tavern along with weavers and labourers and carters; social distinctions were minimal, only the minister, the doctor and the occupants of the Big House, the Hays, were considered in a class apart. There were some, like James Chambers, who formed a sort of tenuous bridge between the gentry and the working classes. He was well educated, a great reader, knowledgeable, articulate. Nevertheless he did not think it beneath him to open a shop when the need arose.

The shops were in the New Town, the smarter of the two streets, though still hardly elegant. They were cramped and stuffy, with half doors, beside which hung a bell to be pulled to summon the shopkeeper either from his back parlour or from his position down the road, chatting to a friend. Nobody tried to attract custom; no empty sugar casks were set outside the grocers; "for everybody would have known that the boys had picked the last particle of the sweet contents out of the chinks of the wood many weeks ago"; no parcels of imaginary feminine fripperies dangled outside the drapers. Usually the shopkeeper was leaning over the half door like a horse out of its stable, chatting with passers by and watching what other shops they went to. It was considered insulting for a regular customer to try another shop. A little girl, approaching a draper for some silk to embroider a handkerchief, was told tartly "go back to your mother my dear, and tell her to get the thread where she got the handkerchief." On the whole there was little overlapping of the baker, draper, carpenter, grocer, and Geordie Law who professed to mend watches. His method, since he could not get new parts, was to cannibalise one watch to provide for another, the mutilated victims lying in saucers. Robert was a little bitter about a watch in his family, which might have come to him, "but which had lain for years in a dismembered state in a saucer in Geordie Law's dusty shop." Watches were status symbols and much to be prized.

There was one shopkeeper in Peebles who changed the life of the boy Robert Chambers and of his brother William. "There was a bookseller in Peebles, a great fact"; as he wrote these words nearly fifty years later Robert may have smiled at how out of date they sounded. Yet Alexander Elder was indeed exceptional at the time, for the little pastoral town by the banks of the Tweed was not the home of scholars, and most of its inhabitants were poor. For it to harbour a man who not only sold books, but also ran a library was something of a miracle. However, being sober and industrious Mr Elder flourished, and one of his best customers was James Chambers.

Sandy Elder catered mostly in school books; shorter catechisms, school bibles and testaments, coloured pictures of the world, of the Battle of Trafalgar and other historical events; and also slates and paper and quill pens. He also kept penny chap books, flimsy little publications "of a coarseness of language that would make a modern Scotsman's hair stand on end." Presumably the elders and the ministers did not visit his shop; or perhaps he whisked his vulgar ware out of sight when they did. There was a homely air about the place, provided by his cow who was to be seen chewing her cud behind the bookshelves in the back of the premises.

William and Robert Chambers gobbled up everything that their father brought home, and by nine or ten years old had read Gulliver, Don Quixote, the poetry of Pope and Goldsmith, and as much travel and adventure as they could get their hands on. As they were only allowed one book at a time, they sat side by side on the bed reading together; a picture that is worth cherishing, in view of what happened to their relationship later. Sandy kept some esoteric volumes, one of which was Gavin Douglas's translation of the Aeneid. Robert thought this would provide him with a wonderful crib for his school work, but when he got it home found Douglas's sixteenth century vernacular as impenetrable as the original Latin.

But the greatest windfall provided by Sandy Elder was the fourth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. James Chambers "made a stretch with his moderate means" and bought it, but it took up so much room in their parlour that it was carted upstairs into the attic, and dumped beside the meal ark and the cotton wefts. Apparently Robert came upon it by chance. Possibly James saw it as an "investment" which could be cashed in and therefore must be preserved from rough handling by the children. At any rate, to Robert it was like finding hidden treasure, or the key to a code that unlocked the secrets of the universe.

"I felt a religious thankfulness that such a convenient collection of human knowledge existed and that here it was spread out like a well-plenished table before me. What the gift of a whole toy shop would have been to most children, this book was to me. I plunged into it. I roamed through it like a bee." Every spare moment saw the eleven year old mount the ladder into the attic, and there in the musty silence suck up the honey of information which neither of his schools had provided. No other boy in the town dreamed of the worlds he was discovering. Even William was unmoved by the momentous find.

This meeting of Robert Chambers and the Encyclopedia Britannica was fateful; they were ready for one another; he for the facts his mind had always craved, the encyclopedia for this of all the boys (or adults) in a remote little backwater in the Borders who could appreciate its contents. In the attic of that cottage beside Eddlestone Water tremendous visions opened up in a mind exactly ready to receive them, visions that shaped not only his own life but that of countless others to whom he later offered what

had come to him by chance, but which he worked all his life to make accessible as a right.

He read every article, on every subject, but homed in on the scientific ones; astronomy and geology and natural history particularly. "I gathered that the animals, familiar and otherwise, were all classified into a system through which some faint traces of a plan were discernible." Was this the first seed of an idea that was to grow quietly in his mind for thirty years, and then flower in his most famous work? "What a year that was for me!", that eleventh year when his mind expanded like a balloon. It was the last happy year of his childhood in fact. While he brooded in the attic, his family life collapsed into fragments. One of the casualties of the crash was the Encyclopedia.

The delight Robert took in being informed and enlightened was something of an indictment against the educational system that had failed to do either for him for seven years. To this day there is a certain smugness in Scotland about its schools, which have always been presumed to be "better" than elsewhere in the British Isles. Ever since John Knox's Book of Discipline laid out plans for universal education, available to rich and poor equally in all the most inaccessible regions of the country, the presumption has been that the "lad of pairts" has had an equal chance of getting on in the world, of getting to university particularly, whatever his status.

A closer look at the system reveals a less satisfactory picture. In Peebles there were the equivalents of primary and secondary schools, to which in theory all had access. The primary was entered at five, and was endowed by the heritors or big landlords, and its fees were a modest two shillings and threepence a quarter; nearly £20 though, and quite beyond the reach of the poorest widows or labourers. Its students therefore were the children of weavers, shopkeepers, craftsmen; the middle classes if such a definition is appropriate for such a small scale community. Many of these children were casualties before they reached the secondary stage at eleven. If they were thought to be more useful at home, their education was forthwith forgotten about.

William Chambers describes an even earlier "school" he attended, and presumably Robert did too; a nursery group run by Widow Cranston, "who according to her own account was qualified to carry forward her pupils as far as reading the Bible." Nobody else had qualified her; any impecunious old lady could set up school to eke out her tiny pittance. She did not overestimate her skills; any really difficult words she described as "pass overs" and she and the children left them alone. Jean Chambers may have been glad to get at least one child out of the house for part of the day. William must have had a soft spot for her, because when he became rich he bought her house.

At about five years old William and Robert were handed over into the care of Mr James Gray the master of the parish school "a long low building situated on the green near the Tweed and (was) divided into two parts, one for the junior classes under a "helper", the other for the more advanced classes under the master." James Gray was considered above average, being the author of spelling and arithmetic text books used extensively in Scotland.

His methods however were not enlightened. "We were taught to read the Bible and to spell the words. No attempt was made to enlighten us as to the meaning of any of the lessons." Their other schoolbook was the catechism of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which every child in Presbyterian Scotland had to learn by heart. This task Robert called the Scottish Inquisition. The text

was totally incomprehensible, but failure to remember it led to punishments, not rigorous in this school but fierce in many. For five- year-olds all over the country this was at one time "the only initiatory book used for instruction in English in Scotland."

It is not surprising that the children, bored out of their minds, were noisy and restless given half a chance. "Nothing kept the boys in any sort of order except the tawse, and when the master's back was turned an uproar took place accompanied by showers of bibles and spelling books, that was truly dreadful." When the master was there, and a couple of boys were talking, he would hurl the tawse between them, and they would have to carry it up to the desk, each holding one of its whips, to be punished by a few lashes on the palms. Mr Gray was not a harsh man however, unlike many other sadists let loose in Scottish schools.

Not all dominies were demented, and there is a case for presenting them as a much misused, and greatly under-rated class. They were badly paid, usually poorly housed, their position insecure since it relied on patronage. They were often men with abilities far greater than they had the opportunity to use, frustrated and futureless. Parents did not object to their use of the whip, and there were no school inspectors at the time. Robert and William later worked hard to bring their plight before the public, and to improve their pay.

When Robert moved on, at about eight years old, to the care of Mr James Sloan at the Grammar School, he found the regime less relaxed than under Mr Gray; "severe after the fashion of his day" was his kind way of putting the fact that "the lash was pretty constantly in use." For the average, or rather dim pupil, they "never seemed to understand what it was all about, or what end was in view, in this incessant hammering of their brains with unintelligible Latin rules and equally incessant affliction of their bodies with stripes." Idleness and stupidity were confused, so that the boys who could not learn were beaten as frequently as those who would not.

Classics, and particularly Latin, were drummed into the Grammar School pupils because they needed to have some knowledge of it if they wanted to move onto the next and last stage of their education, the university. Fifteen was the average age for university entrance, and there was no qualifying exam; the entrant only had to show a modest mastery of mathematics and a grounding in Latin. Mr Sloan was a painstaking teacher according to Robert, but his efforts were concentrated on the two or three who showed aptitude in each class. The rest were "a dead weight in the lower part of the class, only going through forms of education."

Most of their thoughts were concentrated on ways of easing the pain of the tawse. If Mr Sloan came to school with his night cap on, it was a bad sign "for they had learned from experience that any little personal illness did not improve his temper." They also "watched the wearing out of a pair of tawse and the coming of another, with great anxiety, curious to know whether the change would be for the better or the worse." They speculated on Mr Sloan's methods of sharpening his instrument. "Some thought he burnt the ends of them; some had an idea that they were steeped in some chemical composition." Different theories were held about the best way of easing the pain of the punishment; licking the hand with a wet tongue was advised by some; one "noted victim" was to be encountered lying prone beside one of the pits full of tanning fluid, immersing his hands in the hope that the same process as thickened the animal skins would give his skin an equally hard and resistant surface. Writing of this callous use of the whip, Robert was thankful "that this old system of instruction by brute force is

no longer practised by any teacher worthy of the name." Corporal punishment, only lately outlawed, was later reserved for the positively disruptive pupils rather than the negatively dim ones.

Robert was a natural scholar and a beneficiary of Mr Sloan's good teaching, This was partly because the operation to remove his extra toes, carried out by an incompetent doctor with a pair of scissors, left his feet deformed. For the rest of his childhood after it was performed he walked with a limp and was in constant pain, because bits of bone protruded and he could never find shoes to fit. This meant he could not take part in football and shinty games, and was nervous of getting involved in rough and tumbles with bigger boys. It was not part of the idyllic picture he half believed in when he looked back to his Peebles days.

Boys, he observed from the safety of his sixties, seemed to form "a type of primitive society". The boy who could thrash all the others was the natural leader of the pack. Everything was settled by fights, and to these young savages "Cruelty - cruelty to animals, to weaker and inoffensive companions, to dotage and fatuity, to whatever cannot resist - is the leading feature of their moral nature." Worn out carters horses left on the village green were regularly pelted with stones and bricks by the boys on their way to school, idiots were jeered at, cats constantly chased and tortured. Nobody in the community questioned this behaviour; at the time it is doubtful whether Robert would have. He would simply have learnt the evasive tactics that children everywhere had to use.

Nevertheless, this country childhood was in many ways, particularly in the early years, a blessing to look back on. He remembered it in distinct stages; first the mud pie stage, when children stayed near home and built out of the wet mud at their doors. Then, a little older, there was the stage when groups, under an older child, ventured into the fields; only two or three hundred yards away in those days, but containing a new world, of flowers and butterflies and "the mystic wealth" of birds nests. Nesting was a passion and a preoccupation in the "pinafore days" and for long after. Were there eggs, or young birds within? If taken, could they rear the fledglings at home? Just to collect the eggs from different nests, to display them, was immensely exciting.

The rushy meadows near the stream provided materials for making hats and rattles, and tiny mill wheels to set going in the water. By five years old they were invading wood yards, and playing see-saws on planks, and then they became part of "a round of games in connection with the seasons - marbles (called with us the bools) cherry stones ( the paips) pitch and toss and kite flying (the dragon) predominated in succession, according to what appeared a fixed order, though I never could see how any such was maintained." At the beginning of June they were all off to the woods to "harry the crows"; to take the fledgling rooks from the nests to make into pies. The waters of the Tweed provided bathing and fishing and paddling about in the pebbles to search for eels under big stones. And there was always shinty, a kind of hockey. Any strong stick from the hedgerow and any bit of wood round or square would suffice for this game, which any number could play.

"There was nothing that could be called property among us at this era." Status symbols were humble; a boy with an eel skin tied round his ankle displayed it as a Red Indian might display a scalp. "What then were the feelings of the boys in some particular street or district, when suddenly one of them appeared in possession of a knife!" It was an honour just to look at it, a thrill to be allowed to touch. The owner was both admired and envied, and became automatically the leader of the gang. One such

insisted on reinforcing his position by paring the nails of his followers to the quick, which was painful, and prevented them scratching their heads, but they bore it from one so grand, a Knife Owner.

In their landlocked parish the idea of the sea was extraordinary and vague, a mysteriously tenuous conception often wondered about. One boy had climbed a hill in the parish "whence he had got a kind of view of the sea, and it had appeared just like a large green field, while the ships looked something like carts going about in it." The desire to see this grass green ocean became a kind of wild craving among some of the boys, and several of them ran off to Leith to try to enlist as cabin boys, rescued by their parents "when just at the point of starvation."

Almost the same curiosity, akin to a craving, was held about Edinburgh. Anyone who went there and then returned to Peebles "was always looked on as a superior sort of person." The last words that Robert wrote in this memoir were "Often did we think what a fine thing it would be to see Edinburgh." There he stopped, because there in a sense everything stopped. But before the final calamity which ended the quiet rhythms of the Peebles years, there had been changes which affected both him personally, his family and the sleepy stagnation of the two streets.

Neither William, who wrote about this period in his Memoir, nor Robert who described it in his early fragment of autobiography of 1833, were really in possession of the facts. They remembered moving from their house by Eddlestone Water to another in the New Town, only a few hundred yards away, and part of a draper's shop which their father opened when they were ten and eight years old. They remembered the presence in the town of "foreigners", who wore odd uniforms and were to be seen fishing in long leather boots.

They remembered vividly the arrival in 1810 of about a hundred French, Italians and Poles; to them at the time rather glamorous in their tarnished uniforms, in spite of being technically "prisoners." Such a large influx of outsiders into a small rural parish was soon thought to be a boon, though at first they must have swamped the locals and come under a certain amount of dour scrutiny from the minister and elders, Catholics as they were and only lately enemies. They were billeted amongst families, and welcomed by the shopkeepers. "A number of them when captured in Spain had secreted sums of money about their persons, and gold ducats and sequins...were for a period as common as guineas in Peebles; although that, perhaps is not saying very much."

The prisoners who came to Peebles were officers on parole from the two big "camps" at Penicuik nearby. By 1814 there were 122,000 prisoners of war in Britain, from various sources, the Peninsular Wars of 1808 to 1809 producing a huge influx. A great many of them were seamen captured in battles and from privateers, and it was something of a problem to know where to put them all. They had to be brought up to their place of confinement by sea, so it had to be near a port, and for this reason Penicuik was chosen. Two abandoned mills were surrounded by high palisades and the large rooms strung with hammocks.

The Transport Board was in charge of them, and ideally they were to be provided with one and a half pounds of bread, half a pound of beef and a quarter of a pint of pease daily, but one of them remembered; "It was terribly cold, there were no windows, no warmth, no fruit, but the cabbages were very large." They were dressed in a loose cotton garment, usually yellow, to prevent them escaping with

ease and their blankets were "meagre." Cold, homesick and hungry, many of them sickened and died from tuberculosis, pneumonia and unspecified fevers. On market days they were allowed to communicate through the grille with the outside world and "making love through the grille was a common distraction", though this was likely to have been discreet kisses and hand holding.

William Chambers as a boy visited one of the camps with his father on a Sunday, and was surprised to find them dancing, fencing, cooking, and sitting at little booths selling articles they had made themselves out of bits of wood and rush. Some of the crafts were exquisitely fashioned, and today the ones that have survived sell for large sums; ships in bottles, beautifully carved boxes, with painted scenes on their lids. Money earned from the sale of these oddments was spent at market day on extra food.

For a year the largely French parole prisoners from Penicuik became part of the Peebles scenery. For something to do they set up a private theatre in an old ballroom "in which they enlivened the town by performing gratuitously some of the plays of Corneille and Moliere." Jean Chambers lent dresses for the actors, and letters show at least one of them to have been a friend and regular visitor at the house. William bred rabbits to sell at their mess. Kirk Sessions records show them fraternising with local girls in a way that sometimes led to trouble.

Along with other shopkeepers, James Chambers welcomed them into his newly set up drapers shop, and gave them generous credit. William said that Jean his wife objected to this, and warned him about his folly in lending to men not only transient, but beyond the law. William remembered the Sunday evening when the news arrived that the prisoners were to leave, and a militia regiment replace them. "What a gloom prevailed at several firesides that fatal evening" he recalled; he was eleven at the time, the prisoners left in November 1811, so it could be that he was repeating stories told to him by his parents later.

Robert and William both maintained that the debts owed by these men were straws that broke the camel's back of their father James. His draper's shop was not doing well, and now this; "not one of them ever paid a farthing" William recorded. But a series of letters preserved by the Chambers family show this to be false. Did William read these letters and deliberately evade their revelations? Or did he (pardonably and conveniently) simply repeat the story that had become family lore?

The truth is that one of the prisoners, a personal friend, arranged to act as an agent in collecting the debts, and seven of his letters survive, the first of the seventeenth of November 1811, the last five months later written on thirtieth of March 1812. The first letter, from Dumfries, was addressed to Madam, Jean Chambers. Its English was remarkably good, obviously a year in Peebles, and previously time in Penicuik, had not been wasted by this Frenchman. "The inhabitants I think are frightened with Frenchmen" he wrote, "and run after us in order to see if we are made like other people." However no hostility was ever expressed towards these "enemies" He asked Jean if her uncle had given her the 30/-.

The next ten days later was in answer to one from James Chambers, sent by a Thomas Murray. He had been to the theatre, which was very good for a little town like Dumfries; however there was a problem as a bell rang at six o'clock, and he had to return to his lodgings; one of the few prohibitions

on the movements of prisoners. In a postscript he mentioned money he had been given by one of the debtors; eleven pounds altogether, of which ten pounds and six shillings was for James, and the rest, seven and sixpence, for the bookseller. Six and sixpence for Grieve the tailor, he asked to be delivered. Another debtor added one pound nine shillings, and would send more.

On December 12th he forwarded a debt of four pounds and ten shillings, and "I was not a little displeased at M. Landeree sending you his ten pounds unknown to me...I told him that you had trusted me with the several obligations of those who ought you something and charged me to collect your debts." A week later they were moved to Moffat, and were taken aback at being asked fifteen, twenty or twenty five shillings a week for lodgings. Eventually he found some at the same price he had paid at Peebles. Where this money came from is not clear, though the men were getting some funds through from France.

On January 9th he was glad to announce that a M. Aureliac had received money from France and had paid five pounds; "which he owed to you he thanks you very much for your goodness and trust to him." Another man apologises for the delay, "but at his first money he will send them to you." On January 28th he sent six pounds from M. Barnard, and two other sums of fifty shillings and twenty three shillings to be handed over to Mr Brown and Mr Smibert. He also mentioned two others having paid.

An undated letter to Jean Chambers tells of three of the prisoners escaping and one being picked up in London, the others vanished; "as for me the fancy of breaking my word never was entertained into my mind". The relaxed form of "imprisonment" they were enjoying could not have been an incentive to run away, though homesickness and the climate must have urged some of them to make the effort. The last letter of March 30th expressed the hope that there would be more money to send, but "unluckily these many weeks we have received neither money nor letters." He has heard that some of his friends have been moved to Sanquar and are very uncomfortable "they can get neither beef nor mutton, nothing but salted meat and eggs - they have applied to the transport officer in order, I was told, to be removed to Moffat." He himself was giving French lessons, and improving his English. He told James Chambers it was useless for him to come in search of his money, he would let him know if any arrived.

From these letters the extent of the money owed to James shows him to have been very foolish. He recovered twenty-five pounds and sixteen shillings, plus two other unspecified amounts; over two thousand pounds at current rates. Nevertheless he did get quite a lot back, and the impression given that the prisoners just disappeared without paying a penny is not true. "A list of their names, debts, and official position in the army of Napoleon remains as a curiosity in my possession" William wrote. Unfortunately the list has gone, but the whole curious affair was used by both brothers to show their father to have been "let down" and ruined through no fault of his own.

The other cause of his downfall was said to be the collapse of the hand-weaving trade, as Arkwright's power looms employed fifty unskilled workers in place of the two thousand five hundred home based spinsters and weavers who did the same work. Here again, a closer look at the situation raises some questions. The fact was that with the new machinery, the demand for cotton became insatiable, and far from the powerlooms driving out the handlooms, the low wages paid to the latter kept them well occupied until 1830. There was no sudden crash as implied by William and Robert,

with their father as a casualty. Long after he left Peebles, indeed after his death, there was a buoyant market still for his product.

The problem with cotton had always been the amount of labour involved between the picking and the final processing; picking, ginning (freeing the fluff of its seeds) baling, cleaning and carding turned a cheap material into an expensive one. Then various inventions, such as a ginning machine and Arkwright's Jenny, transformed the situation. Vast new acreages of cotton were sown in America (with horrible consequences in the slave trade; slaves were actually "bred" to cope with the great demand for their services) and as this cotton flooded into the country, for a time everyone, the old timers and the new factory workers, were kept busy. In 1812 handweavers were in a strong enough position to form a union and go on strike for higher wages; the strike failed, and it was in fact the beginning of the end for them.

The real cause of the later distress was the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the return of huge numbers of unemployed men; for some reason weavers were always men, spinners women. This was in 1815, three years after James Chambers had found himself ruined. So it seems that his original failure could not be directly attributable either to the collapse of handweaving, nor to the French prisoners. It must be looked for in himself, and Robert gave some clues about this in his first memoir, albeit couched in prolix language, his way of coping with events almost too painful to describe.

"My father had always been a man of social disposition, and under the temptations which beset a man of enterprising and speculative character in a dull country town, was perhaps as remarkable as any of the better class of citizens at convivial indulgences." Miss Ritchie's tavern obviously saw a lot of James Chambers; as things became more difficult no doubt he drowned his worries deeper in her jugs of toddy. Frustrated by being in work he disliked and altogether too goodnatured and easygoing to succeed in the business either of organising weavers or running a shop, he was drinking heavily. This continued to be a problem, and contributed to his death fourteen years later at the age of fifty four.

As for Jean Chambers, she "had always dressed herself and her children in a way which, though by no means expensive, such as was not justified by her rank in life...this of course supplied material for many ungenerous remarks." His mother must have told Robert these facts later; at eleven years old he was unlikely to have noticed her clothes or listened to unpleasant gossip about her. So the picture is of a family (there were five of them by the time they came to leave) living beyond its means, French prisoners and handweavers having little to do with it. When his debts became too overwhelming, a conference was called of all the relations, and one of Jean Chambers' family advised a sequestration, and according to Robert, pocketed what was over for himself. Whatever the facts of the case, whatever the reasons, the Chambers found themselves homeless and bankrupt.

Why they then moved to Edinburgh is not fully explained; it was a great deal to do with the desire to get away from a small place where they were well known and had relations and a standard of life which they could no longer maintain. In Edinburgh James Chambers intended to carry on his commission business. He was only forty, and may have presumed on being able to get other work. On a dismal December day they loaded a few bits of furniture onto a wagon, and with thirteen year old William, eight year old Margaret, six year old James, and one year old Janet, set off across the moors to the mythical city.

Robert was left behind with his mother's mother, Janet Noble. This clever son, one of the stars at Mr Sloan's establishment, was to be allowed another year there. He would help the younger boys (he himself was eleven) and thus pay his way. Later in a letter to Hugh Miller he referred to his "bitter painful childhood", and it was at this point that the pain began. His world simply fell to pieces, and one speculates that he spent the rest of his life trying to put it together again.

It was a personal tragedy, prolonged through adolescence, but in the context of nineteenth century childhoods nothing special. In the emotive but accurate words of a historian of the Scottish working classes, ; "For three quarters of a century the factory capitalists of Scotland exploited, maimed and murdered the worker's child...it toiled, and starved and died for a master's profit." The new mills discovered a vast cheap source of labour, and used it with a callousness that clouds the age.

Children were sold with bankrupt's effects, transported to the tropics, lashed and hung up by the wrists, sent down coal mines for twelve hour shifts, and up chimneys to roast or rub themselves raw. They were crippled by machinery, beaten (and no doubt abused) in "homes", and died off by hundreds of thousands as the result of starvation and disease. Even for the more fortunate children, whose parents did not have to send them into factories or mines, there were hazards. The combination of the church's dire threats, issued weekly from the pulpit, the schoolmaster with his tawse waiting for them at school, and the legion of brownies, bogles and restless ghosts ready to spring on them after dark, created an atmosphere of unease at the least, stark terror at the most, for Scottish children.

Robert never wrote of that year he spent in Peebles when his family had departed, except to mention that he now had no money for books from Sandy Elder, but managed to get a few by exchanging "pieces" (slices of bread and butter) for volumes owned by the boarders at Mr Sloan's. There were thirty or forty of these. Boarding was quite common, some of the children coming from towns, or distant villages, some from the colonies. As no records were kept and no inspectors went round to check on these boarding houses, it is impossible to say how many there were. From the fact that the boarders wanted Robert's bits of bread so badly that they gave him books in exchange, it seems they were not well fed. One of the casualties of James Chamber's bankruptcy was the Encyclopaedia Britannica, dreadfully missed, but Robert's almost photographic memory would have stored much of its contents.

The picture he painted of those first twelve years brings alive a country town at the turn of the century, just at the moment when both agricultural and industrial revolutions were breaking up old patterns. It creates memorable vignettes; the stingy elder's wife drinking tea from her cupboard, with anxious glances over her shoulder in case her husband should return and catch her at this wicked, wasteful occupation; widow Scott airing her dead clothes on good drying days; Pisty Walkers wife climbing the jail stairs with a plate of porridge, to be rudely pushed aside by the criminal whose breakfast it was to be; the elder Tammas, axe uplifted, countenance outraged, at the petition of the theatrical manager to use the town hall; Hannah Muir and her mother beside their little counter at one end of their cottage, gentle uncomplaining women in spite of poverty and bereavement; Clap Meg beating on her wooden platter and shouting the news up and down the two streets, to the indignation of the piper whose prerogative this was.

Destitution was everywhere apparent; the daily appearance at their door of an old crippled woman being pushed on a handcart to beg was something Robert accepted as normal. Then, as now, the issue

of who really "deserved" help, and who was simply shirking, was not resolved. Those who were crippled through no fault of their own, as in wars, were able to register and receive the blue smock and the badge of the licensed beggar. They were often fed by the wealthier farmers, and had well known "rounds", thus becoming channels for conveying news and gossip. Scotland was awash with vagrants, and the problem was to become worse after the end of the Napoleonic wars, the evictions in the Highlands, the huge influx of desperate Irish, the eventual triumph of machinery over manual skill.

Peebles would feel the changes. The three summer pastures would be removed from common usage, enclosed and privately run as a farm. No more would a boy blowing a horn call out the cows every morning, and return them through the evening streets, each cow turning in at its own gate. So the poorest inhabitants had to give up their cows, a valuable source of food and fuel and manure, just at a time when many of them were losing the income they received from spinning and weaving at home. The gap widened between rich and poor, and the old, even, relaxed community life broke down. The "haves" retreated from the "have nots"; they did not chat with them round their fires of a Saturday night. Many of the really desperate transferred to the towns for work, and lived in an urban squalor far worse than anything in Peebles Old Town.

Robert remembered it just before the changes, though of course these were not immediate. He spent the first twelve years as a country boy, his most formative years, arguably his happiest. They were not idyllic, childhood never is. His painful feet prevented him from being a normal, physically active child, and encouraged him to withdraw from the company of bigger boys, whom he feared, perhaps because they taunted him. His passion for books, his desire for learning was divisive too. Most of the children emerged from school with wild shrieks of relief, as from a torture chamber. Robert did not join them at their games. He climbed the ladder to the loft, and immersed himself in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The man was there in the boy, for the passion never abated, though he became sociable and charming as confidence in himself grew. What never left him was the sense of insecurity that was born on that December day when his family left for Edinburgh. He now had no home, and was soon to experience real poverty of a kind he had only read about, if indeed any of his books had described what it was like to come close to starvation in a big city. For the rest of his life he made it his first priority to secure both himself and his family from the fate that had overtaken his childhood. The Dark Ages that were opening up and were to last all through his teens remained like a cloud that would never disperse, hedge himself around as he did with insurance policies and investments in savings banks; at least this is my presumption.

But the boy who joined his family a year later in a squalid close in a run-down part of Edinburgh lost other things as well. He lost the kind, intelligent, inspiring father who had started off his interests in astronomy, and provided him with books and informed talk. Now he had as head of the family a man increasingly a failure, drinking more as a result, and though still in his forties a gloomy disgrace who relied on his wife to support him and the children. The failure of this father could be linked with Robert's later breakdown, it is a common connection in such cases. What did not fail was his attachment to James Chambers, his gratitude for the early years. His brother William could not forgive the incompetence that had landed them all in a muddle from which in the end he and Robert had to rescue them. William was bitter and angry and unforgiving. Robert forgave though he never forgot.

His greatest loss was education. He had been well grounded by Mr Sloan, and with his natural ability would have gone on to university where several scholarly careers would have opened up to him. The church would have been his original destination, but science was likely to have claimed him, and with his great abilities he would have joined the brilliant group, the geologists and paleontologists, whose discoveries were changing everyone's conception of the world. When he wrote the book that so startled the world, his career and background would have vouchsafed that it be taken seriously. He would not have been a "Scotch publisher" (thus dismissively alluded to in a recent book about the **Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation**) but a man with degrees, a professor at one of the most prestigious universities in Europe. He would not have needed to remain its anonymous author for the rest of his life. Greatly respected then, he would be greatly honoured now.

At twelve years old both he and his family were still hopeful. It would be to everyone's advantage if one member "got on" and landed a position that could benefit them all. And at twelve Robert seemed cast in that role. Though they were living in cheap cramped quarters, Edinburgh was nevertheless a city still glowing from the fires lighted by David Hume and Adam Smith and William Robertson and several great chemists. There were many more openings than in the sleepy streets of Peebles. William Chambers later looked back on their removal there as a blessing in disguise.

Robert simply could not bear to look back on the next five years at all. Edinburgh became a place he illuminated in his writings, and the source of his success and wealth, but he frequently expressed a desire to get away from it and its painful memories, and built the only home he owned in St Andrews. If he had known what the next few years were to hold; well what could he have done? What he did not do was to let the blackness pervade his life and influence every thought and relationship, as did Dickens in rather similar circumstances.

His family's tragedy did, of course, influence him. It made him touchy, because he was so often humiliated, unjustly but inevitably. The gauche teenager trudging round in shabby clothes and worn out shoes (the only kind that fitted his misshapen feet) and being turned down for jobs way below his capabilities was never forgotten, but he learned to react calmly to situations, schooling himself in philosophical forbearance. The experience made him for a time fiercely ambitious, working furiously and watching avidly for openings, hanging sycophantly round anyone who could patronise him. It made him for the rest of his life a careful saver, learning from his father's inability to manage money. It made him abstemious for the same reason, but not sternly so. His houses became famous for their hospitality. It made him deeply concerned to help young people to get the education they deserved, whatever their backgrounds.

Yet his brother William, who had suffered the same fate, reacted differently in some ways, though he too was ambitious, abstemious, always alert for opportunities to better himself. Robert was his father's son; curious, original, interested in astronomy and other aspects of the new sciences, musical, able to get into easy relationships with people of all classes and backgrounds. In James Chambers these qualities were dissipated and in the end wasted. His son Robert used and perfected his talents, but like a lot of Victorians saw no boundaries to what he could learn. He became a prodigious polymath, a walking encyclopaedia. His memory was always exceptional, and he was happy to remember the Peebles years. The next period of his life he would have liked to forget.

