

(Robt2)

The Dark Ages

The rumour was circulated later that Charles Dickens based his character Mr Bounderby on William Chambers. Mr Bounderby, the self made millionaire of "**Hard Times**", never ceased to remind anyone who would listen that he had pulled himself out of the deepest gutter by his own hard work and brilliant talents. "I hadn't a shoe to my foot. As to a stocking, I didn't know such a thing by name" he boasted. "I passed the day in a ditch and the night in a pigsty." Wildly exaggerating, he invented a drunken grandmother who kept him in an egg box; but of course a boy of his enterprise was not to be held back. "When I thought I would run away from my egg box and my grandmother I did that at once," he assured whatever company he was in.

There is no proof that Dickens met William, but the two families were connected through Robert's daughter Nina Lehmann who was a close friend of the Dickens; she was also, as her letters prove, a very astute and funny observer of the social scene, and might well have "taken off" her uncle's interminable re-telling of the story of his Terrible Boyhood. Her Aunt Janet, William and Robert's sister, who was married to Dickens literary editor and close confidant W.H.Wills, was a well known mimic, who was reported to have kept Dickens in stitches with her impersonations. It is likely that her brother William was one of her targets. According to James Payne, who worked for the Chambers firm as assistant editor and later wrote his memoirs, handkerchiefs would be brought out whenever William started the monologue, which recounted his early struggles; not to hold to eyes but to stuff into mouths to stifle yawns. Robert on the other hand never wanted to be reminded of those years, and complained to Payne that he was sick to death of the two-hundred-times repeated story.

William Chambers may have been an egotistical and conceited bore by that time, but when he tells the tale of Robert and himself in his privately printed Memoir it is persuasive. The Memoir is only reliable as far as it goes; a great deal is withheld, and a gloss put on the relationship of the brothers particularly. There is no mention at all of Robert's breakdown, nor of his book "**Vestiges of Creation**," but there is something authentic about the description of the early years. The details are too accurate to be fabricated, and he does not descend into total nonsense of the egg-box variety, nor boast with Mr Bounderby "So far from having high connections, I have no connexions at all, and I come from the scum of the earth..." William allowed himself a good family background.

The Edinburgh the family found when they alighted from their Fly in December 1813 was hardly the Eldorado of their dreams; though how far the adult members of the family, James and Jean Chambers, had deluded themselves about its beauty and opportunities is hard to say. They obviously knew where to go (and had presumably arranged this in advance); to the shabby, narrow streets of the Old Town, to one of the tall thin buildings, each of which was like a street on its own. The evacuation of this part of the city by the better classes, its taking over by the tradespeople and in the worst areas by the totally impoverished, was nearly accomplished. "Families falling by misfortune into straightened circumstances" as William put it in words that took the edge off the plain facts of bankruptcy and ruin, moved into the houses once occupied by the noble and famous. But whereas in the old days these grandees had owned the whole house in many cases, (though not all), now they were divided into flats connected by a

common stair, each level with its particular status. Their previous inhabitants, and the new rich, the nabobs, the factory owners or large traders, had taken themselves off to the elegant New Town and tried to pretend they had never had anything to do with that dark and noisome area round St Giles and the High Street.

"Families with limited means from the southern counties of Scotland who seek a home in the capital sagaciously pitch on one of the second-rate streets in the southern suburbs" William wrote, though it is doubtful if sagacity had much to do with it, more a sort of gravitation to a place where there are others like yourself, people who have known "better days" and are sensitive about it. "Following the established rule, our first home was a floor entering from a common stair in West Nicholson Street." James Chambers still had his flute and his astrolabe, and intended to carry on the weaving trade on a commission basis. the weavers collecting their webs from him weekly as they had done in Peebles, and carrying on the work in their own homes.

The other occupants of the building William remembered though he was only fourteen at the time. On the floor below a poor widow "drew a scanty living", in other words just managed to keep alive on a small huxtery business. Above them , on a more dignified level, was another widow, of a clergyman, with her two grown up daughters. Gentility and poverty made the lives of such women drab beyond belief, and their marriage chances poor. The best they could hope for was to wed into the church, to rear large families in icy manses on almost as little money. Here in Edinburgh they would sew or give lessons, and if unlucky over suitors, face old ages even more cheerless.

Right at the top, above the clergyman's family was a tailor who worked in the window of his room, a tradesman but respectable, though not quite on the social level of the rest of them, and thus in the worst position in the building. "A family of some distinction" lived on the same level as the Chambers, entering by a different stair, and this must have given them a sense of solidarity, of being with their own kind. In fact these were Miss Betty and Miss Allie Hay, the two ladies of the Big House in Peebles, who had been friends of Jean Chambers mother in her early days. They were now to be found washed up in West Nicholson Street, for reasons not divulged; they could have been left penniless by a foolish or profligate father, which was often the case, and there was no provision for such women if brothers or uncles abandoned them or simply did not exist. They litter the Victorian landscape in their pathetic legions. The fireplace of the Miss Hays kitchen backed onto the Chambers' kitchen fireplace, and the wall between them was so thin, that the servant girls from the two families could talk to one another through the hole left by removing a brick. It seems with all their scant resources, there were still a couple of servants kept.

These people who "occupied an unpretending position in society", (how endless and touching are the euphemisms employed by William and Robert to describe the middle classes getting poorer by the day) are beautifully described in Robert's essay, "Victims". They were victims of a society that made no provision for the inevitable hazards of existence; old age, sickness, bereavement, bad luck; nor for folly or ignorance or a simple trusting nature, such as that possessed by James Chambers. They were also the victims of politics; wars which led to huge rent increases to sustain them; the ends of wars which let loose thousands of unemployed servicemen; the new factories which drew workforces into the cities but made little effort to house them; the inevitable result of such influxes, overcrowding, disease and epidemics. Sanitation was poor and trade unions non-existent. It is quite hard to visualise what it must

have been like for a family like the Chambers, used to a reasonably clean, well ordered lifestyle in the country, to find themselves with very little money, no savings or security of any kind, not very young, with a family of five, suddenly shut in a back street of a city which, even by the standards of the time, was dirty and overcrowded.

William lists the sort of people who were in the same situation. "Widows of decayed tradesmen, who were moving heaven and earth to get their sons into hospitals, and their daughters taught to be governesses. Teachers in the decline of life, like poor Picken, endeavouring to draw a subsistence from the fees of most-difficult-to-be-procured pupils. Licensed preachers to whom fate had not assigned a kirk, and who after years of pining, now made a livelihood by preparing young men for university degrees. Genteel unmarried women, left destitute by improvident fathers, who contrived to maintain themselves by colouring maps, or by sewing fine needle-work for the Repository...Why continue the catalogue?"

Presumably there was a kind of comfort for James and Jean Chambers to find so many others like themselves, "a fellow feeling in circumstances." They became quite friendly with the Pickens, Ebenezer the father "a scholarly gentleman in reduced circumstances professed to teach languages and endeavoured to sell by subscription volumes of poems, which I fear did not do much for him." His son Andrew emigrated to one of the pestilential marshes in the new world, Poyais, and "with a shirt for surplice" helped to bury most of the settlers, acting as chaplain though on what grounds is not stated. It was the great era of emigration, quite a lot of it forcible, a subject that was seriously to occupy William and Robert Chambers later.

By the time the Pickens were their neighbours, the family had moved to Hamiltons Entry, Bristo Street, to a second floor flat in an area even shabbier than the first. This was because the hand weaving which James Chambers was trying to sustain on a commission basis was not going well. Partly it was the slow but inexorable decline in the whole handweaving trade, partly it was the old problem with James; his lack of business acumen, and his too-trusting nature. These were not the simple, familiar men of Peebles. "Carrying on their handicraft in obscure recesses in Fountainbridge, St Ann's Yard, the Back of the Canongate, or Abbey Hill, it was sometimes as difficult to trace them out as to get any right clue to their manoeuvres."

Vainly James waited for them to return with the webs he had given them to work up; they pawned them and disappeared. He even advanced them money; it seemed he had learnt nothing from his experience with the French prisoners; they were very poor and he was soft hearted. So on Whitsunday 1814 they moved with the very little money they still had left. Later in an essay called Removals Robert wrote of this Whitsunday occupation of half the population; a sort of General Post when for all sorts of reasons the Scottish middle classes moved house. For some of them it was a frivolous whim that dictated the change. For the Chambers at this stage it was dire necessity.

The only consolation James Chambers had at this time was his old German flute, "although the favourite airs, such as Corn Rigs, did not sound half so sweetly...in the dingy atmosphere of Hamiltons Entry, as they had done along the Eddleston Water." There is something very tragic in the picture of this middle aged, threadbare father sitting in a cheap lodging and playing tunes that reminded him of evenings in his own village; or perhaps mornings when the wooden porridge bowls were sending up

steam from the cottage window sills, and the boy with his horn was collecting the cows to pasture. It was to become one of many, increasingly dismal pictures of this unfortunate Victim.

Music was his great consolation; there is no mention at this stage of his other source of support, the local tavern. As things got worse and worse he did apparently turn to the bottle, and the final debacle was attributed to his staggering progress back from a drinking spree; but that was still ahead. Now he made friends with some refined musical gentlemen; Mr John Hamilton author of the song "Up in the Morning Early", nearing the end of his days but "seen creeping feebly along the walks in the Meadows deriving pleasure from the sunshine" like a weak wasp in autumn. There was also the Rev. Archibald Alison and his organist at the Episcopal Chapel in the Cowgate, men of education and "elegant diction" who soothed the harsh sense of exile. The organ and the choir drew him often to church. It is important to know the kind of religious education Robert received, and the fact that the subject is seldom mentioned by either brother when recording his childhood, seems to suggest that it was formal but not over zealous.

Meanwhile Jean Chambers, still a fairly young woman of thirty four, still pretty and neat in her appearance, coped with the day to day problems of feeding the family; William rising fifteen, Robert thirteen, Margaret ten, James eight, and two year old Janet. Again it is hard to return to a time of unheated, unplumbed houses, and the difficulties of bringing up children in them. Coal was carried up the stairs (often by Highlanders, tough and desperate immigrants) and often water too, this last varying in price according to which floor you were on. Sanitation was usually an outside privy, waste disposal non existent. Six years later at forty Jean Chambers had another child, David, an event that must have been as unexpected as it was unwelcome. What methods of birth control women like her used to prevent a yearly addition to the family is not clear. Abortion was more likely to have been the resource turned to. According to the gossipy John Heiton in his book "**The Castes of Edinburgh**" "North Loch received as they say a good many new born infants from secret chambers." Jean Chambers was not the type of woman to throw unwanted babies out of the window, but this whole problem of an inability to control conception was devastating at every level.

The Old Town of Edinburgh still had its trades clustered in recognised areas; the horse market in Cowgate, the fish market in High Street, the shoe market at Forresters Wynd, meal and corn at Tolbooth and Libertons Wynd, butter and cheese at Upper Grassmarket and so on, and to these Jean Chambers (or her servant if she still kept one) would go to shop. There were also some larger stores, and William tried to get work in one. He describes it very clearly, considering he was writing in his sixties of what he saw at fourteen. "The windows exhibited quantities of raw sugar in different varieties of brownness, hovering over which were swarms of flies in a state of frantic enjoyment. Sticks of black licorice leaned coaxingly on the second row of panes, flanked by tall glass jars of sweeties and peppermint drops; behind these outward attractions there were observable yellow painted barrels of whisky, rows of bottles of porter, piles of cheeses of varied complexions, firkins of salt butter and boxes of soap...and the floor was "battered with dirt and debris."

Wherever she shopped, it became more and more difficult for Jean Chambers to pay for her purchases, particularly when Robert joined them. There were middle men who would lend money on a repayment of so much a week, each of these attached to a particular shop; but they presumably took interest and were only resorted to in desperation. Desperate measures did eventually have to be turned

to, and the Chambers family learnt a lot from their neighbours about "what expedients could be attempted to elude the payment of rates and taxes", or in their case the rent. "The collector who came periodically to your door with a portentous pocket book" could be "coaxed, wheedled, put off, and told to call again as long as it was safe to do so."

Given the difficulties, what was to be done? Particularly what was to be done about the two elder boys? "Further schooling was out of the question." William writes philosophically about his fourteen year old self. The situation reminds one often of the Dickens family; improvident father, dragging his family down, and particularly his clever sons. There is a big difference, though, in the way young Charles Dickens bitterly, angrily, unendingly resented what was done to him at ten years old, and the cheerful and positive attitude of young William Chambers as he set off to try and get work to help with the family funds.

What William wanted was an apprenticeship with a bookseller. He had been going to book auctions since they arrived in the city, these taking place in the evening, a lantern hung outside an office, and a white calico sheet draped over the door with "Auction of Books" chalked on it. William arrived on the dot, as the lantern was hung up, probably as an escape from his cheerless home as much as anything. "Warm, well lighted, and comfortably fitted up with seats within a railed enclosure...this place of evening resort was as good as a reading room." William "saw and handled books which I had never before heard of", knowledge that was to be put to good use later.

However, pressures were growing stronger to get him settled in an apprenticeship, and nothing in the book trade turned up, which was why he found himself one day trudging towards Leith "not greatly elated with the prospect before me." If he had to spend five years learning the grocery trade, with no further hope of schooling, so be it. The shop when he reached it was depressing "but I had no choice." William was childless, so this question of choices did not crop up in his life. Robert's eight daughters only had the choice of marrying within a prescribed circle, his three sons were provided for by their wealthy father; one taken into the firm, the other two helped to emigrate. Their choices were certainly circumscribed; in the case of the girls by the era, in the boys' by their own lack of ability, but they were a lot wider than those offered the generation before them.

When William was taken into the back room of the store, to be "examined" it became apparent that "Instead of an apprentice it was in reality a horse that might have been advertised for", because his job would be to draw a truck or barrow loaded with several hundred weight of goods through the streets for long distances, to the houses of customers. The grocer looked at him, pronounced him "a much too delicately made youth" and sent him on his way. Rather ruefully he trailed back down Leith Walk, probably not looking to left or right as he pondered how he would break the news to his hopeful parents; past Pilrig Street with no sense of premonition that on the corner where it joined the Walk was the spot of Destiny for himself and Robert.

He was not entirely lost in his gloomy thoughts though, because when he reached Calton Street and the Black Bull Hotel, where the mail coaches started for London, his eyes were drawn inevitably to a bookseller's window. There was the notice he had been searching for months, "Apprentice Wanted." He hurried on home much buoyed up with this consoling possibility, and after a "family cogitation" it was decided that his mother would go next day with him, to look at the place. It was no light matter to sign

your son to five years with a "master", however desperate you might be.

"After being brushed up for the occasion", William was produced once more in front of a prospective employer. Robert later described how mortifying he found this business of being "looked over" in the back rooms of shops and offices, but possibly he was more sensitive; and also he was never accepted, so this gave him a deeper sense of inadequacy and failure. William's appearance satisfied Mr John Sutherland, the bookseller, and even "the extent of my education" which was limited. However his knowledge of books was much greater than the average boys, and this may have helped.

Not that he was to have anything to do with the books. "I should only have to light the fire, take off and put on the shutters, clean and prepare the oil-lamps, sweep and dust the shop, and go all the errands. When I had nothing else to do I was to stand behind the counter and help in any way that was wanted; and talking of that it would be quite contrary for me ever to sit down, or to put off time reading." During the five years the pay was to be four shillings a week, hardly a sum to revive the Chambers family fortunes, but at least it would be one less mouth to feed.

His mother looking ahead to the end of the five years, wondered what would happen then. Obviously they would never be able to "set up" their son with a stock of books and what else could he do? However Mr Sutherland was cheery and optimistic. He himself had started in much the same way he said, all you needed was to be "steady, obliging, attentive to his duties and exercise a reasonable degree of patience" and success was assured. The qualities he laid before them were the ones that in fact carried the Chambers brothers to the peak of their profession, because they never, in all their years of great success and achievement, abandoned them.

So on the 8th of May 1814, just fifteen, William signed away the next five years of his life to dusting, lighting lamps, occasionally serving behind the counter, but never, whatever he did, sitting down for a read. His Memoir is not always absolutely honest, and the fact that he never includes in it the slightest murmur of disapproval at this fate, does not mean that at the time he always felt satisfied with it. "I cannot remember entertaining the slightest despondency on the subject" he writes, speaking specially of the problem of how to make four shillings stretch to cover all his expenses.

He had the "good fortune" to find a room on the top story of a building in the West Port, owned by a Peeble's widow with the "reputation of being excessively parsimonious." With two sons to support she probably had little choice but to keep the house icy cold but as she "let me have a bed, cook for me, and allow me to sit by her fireside...for the reasonable charge of eighteen pence a week" he was considered lucky. How lucky he really felt as he carried a small, blue painted box along the Grassmarket, containing all his possessions, is problematic.

His room at the top of the building was a bed closet with a narrow window, overlooking a tannery and a street "one of the most crowded and wretched in the city" which meant filthy, noisy, smelly and at night probably dangerous to walk down. He did not even have the small space to himself, it was shared by a student of divinity to begin with, and later with Robert, who recalled the experience with horror.

To this establishment William returned after days at the bookshop which turned out to be more arduous than he had expected. "Though not beaten and dragooned as I had been at school" he was sent

miles every day with "a vast quantity of circular letters" which were drumming up interest in the State Lottery, one of his employers sidelines. With as many as three hundred letters to deliver he travelled literally miles, up long flights of stairs, down narrow twisting streets, all on the kale, broth and bannocks provided by his landlady. It was very hard on shoe leather, and on the ninepence he had over for such extra expenses. He was lucky that, unlike Robert, his feet had been properly operated on.

Of course, being who he was, he got a certain amount of amusement and interest in who bought the tickets and how, "and what a queer struggling whimsical set of people came under notice." Usually the buyers could only afford a sixteenth of a ticket, and they were "persons connected with the markets, waiters at hotels, female housekeepers, small tradesmen, and those of limited means generally" whose only hope of easeful wealth lay in gambling. Oddly, inmates of debtor's prisons were the most steady customers; perhaps not so odd, since winning a lottery was their only hope of salvation, though it is surprising they managed to get the money for even a sixteenth part of a ticket.

The most famous shelter for debtors was the Sanctuary, "a cluster of decayed buildings in front and on both sides of Holyrood Palace." This housed some quite distinguished gentlemen, many from England, who wore gold spectacles and were very grateful to William for bringing them books from his employer's lending library to while away their period of boring but necessary seclusion. The Tolbooth jail also housed many debtors, mostly "third rate shop keepers who after struggling for years against debts, rents and taxes, had finally succumbed to the sheriff officer and been drifted to a safe anchorage."

The Sanctuary was quite a cosy place, almost "a union of lodging house and tavern" where inmates entertained their friends, and if they felt homesick, gave five shillings and a dram to the doctor to give them a sick certificate to leave. The relaxed atmosphere was largely owing to the governor, a cheery little man in a pepper and salt suit who was especially kind to those awaiting execution; previously they had been given bread and water for six weeks, but he insisted on them being well fed right up to the last moment, and also properly shaved, so that their walk to the gallows had a little dignity. De Quincey was one of the later inmates of the Sanctuary, with a certain freedom to nip out for Sunday lunch with the eminent author and publisher, Robert Chambers.

The streets that William walked with his three hundred envelopes and the books for the old debtors, were the streets of any nineteenth century city; dirty, noisy, full of the cries of hawkers, the shouts of brawlers from the innumerable drinking houses, the rushing hither and thither of the "caddies", (the local porters with their loads), the clop of horses, the noise of barrel organs; a general hubbub quite unlike the comparative orderly hum of today. In visualising a city like Edinburgh at the time, it is safer to think of a modern Oriental capital, where a tremendous street life still continues; beggars, musicians, animals, street vendors all competing for the narrow spaces. When he took short cuts down back alleys, William would have seen poverty and degradation of a kind that he later worked hard to eliminate; rather disastrously in modern terms, by pulling down a lot of the old buildings.

In the evenings when mason and carpenter lads dropped in, "the conversation turned chiefly on sermons"; so stimulating times would be spent by the half-fire discussing last Sunday's text, and what the preacher made of it. Sermonising was a great art in the Scottish church, For a fifteen year old, worn out, cold and hungry, this was not to be reckoned as a good time, but apparently William was never tempted to go for warmth and solace to a tavern. Plainly he had no money, but drink was cheap and the temptation surely must have been there, though he does not mention it.

The Peeble's widow, his landlady, had one regular visitor, a "horny fisted old acquaintance...with a shepherd's plaid around his shoulders" who after the bannocks and kail which were the staple of the house, "would finish off with a blast on the widow's tobacco pipe." The church did not disapprove of this apparently, and it is a delightful scene; the parsimonious widow and the horny fisted old man taking turns at her pipe; but talking still on "controversial divinity"; such books as "**Hind let Loose**" and the "**Crook in the Lot**", which William said were "standard topics among the class to which they belonged."

In spite of his exhausting days and cheerless nights, William forced himself to get up at five in the morning to read such works as Locke's "**Human Understanding**" Paley's "**Moral Philosophy**", and Adam Smith's "**Wealth of Nations**." These he was allowed to borrow from the shop, and by candle light in winter he tried through them to catch up on his curtailed education. Then a lucky chance allowed him to make his way through the dark winter streets to a baker's shop in a cellar in Canal Street, where for two and a half hours he read aloud to the baker and his sons, in return for a hot roll from the oven. "Seated on a folded-up sack in the sole of the window, with a book in one hand and a penny candle stuck in a bottle near the other" he had them all in stitches with "the jocularities of Roderick Random."

He got this opportunity by getting to know, in the very cold winter of 1815-16, one of the "board carriers", who trudged the streets with posters, among them some provided by his master, bearing messages such as "Twenty Thousand Pounds Still in the Wheel". "The board-carriers - shilling a day men - were usually a broken down set of characters; as for example old waiters and footmen, with pale flabby faces and purple noses; discharged soldiers, who had returned in a shattered condition from the wars; and tattered operatives of middle age, ruined by dram drinking."

He became particularly friendly with, and indeed almost took under his wing one of these; a journeyman baker who had lost an eye in a brawl on a King's birthday riot, and could now only get occasional work in a bakery. The rest of the time he would "perambulate the streets with a lottery-board at the top of a pole over his shoulder", but when passing a dram shop was likely to "dive in, board and all" and emerge penniless and the worse for wear. William apparently came to his help, and in return was told about the baker in Canal Street who wanted to be read to. They must have made an incongruous couple; the slight fifteen year old, the one-eyed inebriated man weaving about with his board announcing that twenty thousand pounds was yours for the price of a ticket.

Apart from energy and money, William like all apprentices lacked time; shop hours "extended from half past seven o'clock in the morning till nine at night with no abatement on Saturdays"; it was a state of affairs he and Robert often called attention to in their **Journal** later. In the little free time available, there were then no clubs or Mechanics Institutes where the young could go for warmth, books or mental stimulation. As the century progressed these sprang up in large numbers, much encouraged by both Chambers brothers of course. They not only worked to establish them, they also provided them with cheap reading material, their purses and their consciences both profiting. The theatre would have been an attraction but William could not afford even its modest cost. He had once been treated to a seat to see John Kemble, and had to make the experience last, since there was no way of repeating it.

There was however one relaxing occupation that he, and later Robert, enjoyed; meeting at the

house of an old man they had got to know, and conducting scientific experiments of a rather simple kind along with two brothers called King, also apprentices. William was much impressed by the brother's knowledge of "retorts, alkalies, acids, combustion and oxygen gas", but his description of the old man, James Alexander, and his wife Janet, is what makes their activities come alive.

Alexander was one more Victim, who had once been servant to a literary gentleman and travelled the world with his master. Now, aged and pensionless, he made his living in various ways, mainly as a street porter when the weather was fine. As a voucher of his respectability he wore a pewter badge pinned to his coat, with Number 3 engraved on it, a sign that he had been enrolled by magistrates as a reputable carrier so long ago that he was the third person to be so verified. He was very proud of this. When it was wet he worked in the one room he possessed "it was kitchen, parlour, bedroom and workshop all in one", mending china and glass, at which he was very skillful. Considering he only had one eye this was even more to be admired, but he put both the glasses from his old spectacles in front of his good eye and swore this did the trick.

Another of his part time jobs was assisting undertakers, either as a mourner in a threadbare black suit with a black cap over his brown wig, or as a grave digger. He recommended this last as very good for rheumatism; "and to hear him on the subject you would have thought it would be a good thing in the way of health and amusement to take to regular exercise in grave digging." As a perk "James seldom left the ground without a few bits of old coffin in good condition" and was able to turn these into fiddles or wooden blocks. Grave diggers should have made a good living in times of such high mortality, but in fact papers record them prowling like vultures round the homes of sick people, offering special hire purchase terms, and being greatly put out when the invalid recovered.

Janet, the wife, spent her days nursing the small fire, and eying with suspicion the "experiments" carried out by the four boys, as did her cat; "when the Leyden jars were placed on the table she fled to the roof of the bed, and there kept eying us during our mysterious incantations." One memorable Sunday all four of them carted an "electrical machine" they had made out to Portobello where James Chambers was then employed, and in Robert's words "Never shall I forget the burst of delight and surprise with which I beheld the blue fluid passing into one of our laden phials."

Meanwhile, in spite of some sincere efforts to continue his schooling in Edinburgh, Robert's prospects were as worrying as had been William's before he was safely apprenticed. Robert was recognised as the scholar, and the church was the direction in which he was headed; the other options would have been medicine or the law, but both would have meant trainings too long and expensive even to be considered. James Chambers had moved to a position in a salt factory near Musselburgh, at first welcomed since at least he got a steady salary and a house, but in fact it turned out that they were living in a filthy smoky slum, and as usual he was finding that business was not what he was good at. The conditions of the men who actually did the panning were a great deal worse; within living memory these workers had been slaves, "they and their children had been heritable fixtures to the spot" until 1799, the year before William's birth. Now technically free, they had few means of escape from the sooty misery of their existences.

Salt panning, like handloom weaving, was on its way out in Scotland, because the relaxation of import duties was to allow cheap rock salt from Lancashire into the country. Scottish salt was made

from sea water; a cumbersome process. The work had to be done on the coast, and near a coal mine for the firing of the pans. The sea water was stored in bucket pots, originally worked by windmills or horse-powered pumps, but by this time usually steam powered. It was emptied into the pans, eighteen by nine feet and located in cramped sheds, under them coal fires to evaporate the water. The salters had to kneel beside the pans, stirring the brine and drawing off the salt, keeping the fires just right, and disposing of the ashes. It was a skilled job, the skill often inherited, but wretchedly paid. Salters were at risk, too, of falling into the boiling brine, crouching as they did beside the steamy pans, with a small ledge over which they had to lean. Neither their skill nor their danger made the slightest difference to the owners of the sheds, who probably never entered the mini-infernos that made them rich.

James Chambers' job would have been that of factor or agent, overseeing the work and keeping the accounts. He was singularly unqualified for what was demanded of him; to be security officer, book-keeper, clerk of works, production manager, pay clerk, sales manager and executive. There is no record of how he came to be employed, but his lack of business skills would have made it a dreadfully unpleasant ordeal, apart from the surroundings which were grimy and cheerless. There was the steady salary though, and he could still count himself more fortunate than the men who had to spend their days leaning over the steaming pans, or those who trailed cartloads of coal backwards and forwards from the pits to the salt pans.

The end came suddenly and in circumstances of a singular sleaziness; "a frightful act of imprudence which I cannot disclose to you" was how Robert put it to Anne when he was describing his early life to her in a letter before they were married. James Chambers was robbed of fifty pounds of the firm's money while returning one night from the city centre to his home. The imprudence was in carrying such a sum around at night in streets full of thieves and beggars, and the facts seem to suggest he was returning from a tavern. It was common for the criminal classes to send spies into taverns, sometimes pretty girls to lure customers back to their houses, and somewhere along the way the robbery would take place. Whatever happened, it devastated the family once more.

James Chambers' problem according to William, was "a dislike to be ordered by anyone." an irritable independence of spirit that meant he was quarrelsome and difficult and annoyed his superiors. What was worse, the smoke, dirt and misery were endured in order to run a shady business, bags of salt being smuggled across the borders in order to evade the high excise duty. So he was neither happy nor secure. and the whole enterprise would no doubt have come to an end, even without that dark night when, as William described it, "my father having the misfortune to be waylaid and robbed of some money which he had collected" was forthwith given the sack.

So off they all trailed again, to a row of houses near Magdalene Bridge, James bruised and battered in body and mind, and never to recover either his spirits or his self respect. It was left to his wife "to set on foot a small business" with the very little left from the disaster, including half a guinea William had received as a tip. Later Robert admitted to his future wife, trying to be honest with her about his past, that this was in fact a tavern or dram shop. Not the best place for their feckless father, not an ideal place for the three younger children, James, Margaret and little Janet to be brought up in, but better than the Sanctuary or the Tolbooth. The education of the younger ones is never referred to by either William or Robert in their Memoirs. James died at twenty, Margaret and Janet both married well.

William's Memoir, when published, was referred to by a reviewer as the best worst-written book of the decade; but Robert's fragment of autobiography of his thirty first year is practically unreadable. This is very curious, since at the time he was delighting the country with his essays in the **Journal**, and had already produced several popular histories. One can guess that the events of his teens were so painful that he could only describe them in stilted circumlocutions, his language acting as a sort of freezing process, rendering the Dark Ages sterile, dead, almost dull.

Any sentence from his Memoir can be produced at random to indicate the turgid flatness of his style; "my superior application gave me advantages in the schoolroom" for "I worked hard at school"; but "a fear of incurring the anger of particular boys, superior in strength and character, however inferior in literature, often held me from making exertions, which might have given me a more decided precedence" for "I would have done better if I had not been afraid of stronger boys." Unfortunately Walter Scott was the role model for aspiring authors, and a hero of Robert's, but he was thirty one when he wrote this fragment, and it is quite different to his published work.

Nevertheless, reading between the lines, the document is worth using as a source of what went on in those appalling years of Robert's boyhood. Obviously the man he became grew from that miserable frustrated boy, who so desperately wanted education and security and a chance to use his splendid talents. From the experience came a great deal that was good; he never forgot what it was like to be turned down and ignored, and was always the most generous encourager of the young, unknown, unprivileged. He worked tirelessly so that the less wealthy could get access to knowledge and made sure that when they got it was of the highest order. He was prudent with the money he earned, so that his family would never go through the ordeal of sudden dispossession. He gobbled up information with an enthusiasm that came from years of privation, of lack of books and teaching. He was a good father, relishing all the stages of his family's growth, in a way quite unusual in a Victorian patriarch, but not unusual considering his relations with his own father. He was a man who found it hard to harbour grudges and never seemed to quarrel with anyone except his brother William; as if he had learnt in those cold years that he was limping round Edinburgh, prospectless and apparently without encouragement, that there is enough pain in the world without adding to it by brooding over injustices, or by spitefully reminding others of their inadequacy.

Of course there were other things, not so helpful, that came out of his childhood; a sense of insecurity, that made him fitfully depressed and in some fundamental way unsure of his ability to keep the good times going; a driving ambition that made him a workaholic, with an inevitable toll to be paid. Like several men of the time he reached a point of crisis and breakdown in mid life through overwork; but being Robert Chambers he employed his "rest period" after this in writing his most famous book. There was also, forgivably, a desire to be accepted by the rich and famous; not snobbery exactly, but a wish to be one of the elite, particularly the scientific elite. The humiliations of those Dark Ages could only be forgotten by being accepted in circles from which he had been so early and so long excluded. In fact they were not forgotten, how could they be? But Robert Chambers remembered wisely for the most part, and his bitterness did not sour him. He was a man of exceptionally sweet nature. The only relationship in which he finally failed was that with William, which makes their long and successful partnership even more astonishing.

"In August 1814 I was removed to Edinburgh where my father's prospects were becoming

somewhat clouded" Robert wrote, understating the case. However "even amidst the clouds of their present distress hopes prevailed", and this clever son was enrolled in a Private Academy in the New Town, run by a Mr Benjamin Mackay. After all, at just thirteen he was almost ready for a university bursary, and could then "advance myself in some measure by my own means." The hopes were too flimsy to sustain in the event, and though his teacher was ready to keep him for nothing till the end of the year ("a compliment to myself that I can never recall without pleasure.") with the removal to Portobello and the salt pans it looked as if his education was over.

But there was still a glimmer of hope. With a regular salary his father might be able to manage another years fees at Mr Mackays and then he would be enrolled at the university and like a lot of other near-starving students, would make his own way to a degree. He had already picked up enough Latin to write verses in the language. "Though I was put to great straits for want of a Latin dictionary", there was a copy of Ainsworth on a stall in the next street and to it I used to resort several times a day." Perhaps it was the memory of that bookstall that gave him the idea that saved him.

It was at this point that Robert joined William in his attic room, and though they shared a bed they were mortified to find that there would be no concession in their rent. William spent a lot of time trudging round trying to find somewhere cheaper, but nowhere else could eighteen pence a week all found be equalled. "Now commenced the truly dark days of my history" Robert writes; the days of his father's mental as well as physical decline after his sacking, the days when the door finally slammed on all hopes of university, and other doors stubbornly refused to open; the days when, on his mangled feet, he trudged in search of work and was turned away from even the most humble openings.

Writing about it all, his language becomes not only stilted but also evasive. His mother nobly held the family together. "At her instigation one of a neighbouring cluster of houses which stood by the wayside, was taken on lease with the view of opening a shop, for the sale of miscellaneous articles amongst which I regret to say it was found indispensable that liquors should be included." But there was a letter to his wife in the year before their marriage, when he was more honest. "My father by a frightful act of imprudence which I cannot describe to you, lost about fifty pounds which belonged to his employers and was soon after discharged. My mother overwhelmed with shame and horror was in perfect despair. She opened a tavern, a wayside tavern!" This was in Urringston Place, and there they stayed until 1821 when they rented the White Horse Inn in the Cannongate, a slightly more respectable establishment. By that time they were saddled with one year old David, and James Chambers was about to embark on his last foolish project before he died three years later.

Robert's description to his future wife Anne of his time with the parsimonious Peeble's widow centres on the iciness of it. "I used to be in great distress for want of fire. I could not afford either that or candle to myself so I have often sat beside her kitchen fire - if fire it could be called which was only a little heap of embers - reading Horace and conning my dictionary by a light which required me to hold the books almost close to the grate." It was not surprising that he told Anne he and William "vowed to act through life in a manner entirely different from my father... Our food was meal..milk and cheese" and some of the widow's broth.

Far worse than cold or hunger was the end of all his hopes of university. He did go back to college, he did stagger on there with kindness and sympathy from the headmaster and some waiving of the fees,

but in May 1916, two months before his fourteenth birthday, he had to leave for good. It was probably the most bitter disappointment of his life; he was so nearly there, just one more year and he could have got his bursary. What made it hard to bear was that he knew his own powers, and knew that of the other students "hardly any of them cared so much for the pleasure of the race or was so ambitious for its eventual honours as myself."

So what was he to do? An apprenticeship like William's seemed the answer, and he was sent round to "the shops of druggists, booksellers, music sellers and other traders" and there in back rooms was looked over and rejected. Since most apprentices needed to be physically strong, this bookish boy with a limp was not wanted anywhere. His friends (whoever they were) "predicted that I would be a down draught on my family."

What he did do was read furiously anything that came his way; thirteen volumes of Smollett's **History of England** were devoured in a few weeks, and he also started reading on scientific subjects, especially astronomy. His father's astrolobes had somehow survived, and with these and Dr Chalmers' astronomical sermons which had just been published, he found a new world opening up to him, though "in all my proceedings I was put to infinite difficulty by the want of books and instruments." Walter Scott was another inspiration, and he began to plan something on the same lines as Scott's romances, an historical novel on the life of Montrose. He read, he thought, he dreamed, and in between he and William invented funny games about the people they saw around them, and their ridiculous ideas, so commonplace, so different from what the pair of them would achieve. Their confidence in their futures, their constant assurances to themselves that they would never be like their father, made their joint lives bearable.

"In the summer of 1817, accident enabled my brother to recommend me to a Russian merchant residing in Pilrig Street, Leith Walk who wished to have a young person to copy his letters. My handwriting being found suitable I was appointed to the situation at a salary of £10 a year, and as I was not required to attend after four in the afternoon I resolved rather to lodge at home than in Edinburgh." So for six months Robert trudged from Portobello and back, ten miles a day only spending a halfpenny on food. Then "a misunderstanding about salary": caused by his father according to William, lost him the job. After that there were three weeks in the counting room of a merchant, an occasional hour or two of teaching "or trying to teach" an undisciplined family, and then never again in his life did Robert Chambers work for anyone else.

There followed the round of humiliating back-room interviews and in this period he discovered in himself a quality that was to save him, and remain with him always; "a quiet steady endurance of all kinds of injuries that could be offered to myself." In a curious sentence he describes a feeling of "acting in an incognito"; as if this diffident, discarded boy was not the real Robert Chambers, and eventually would be in a position to throw off the mask.

One of the worst aspects of his case was that he felt he was a burden to his family; that the "ignominious reputation of a broken down scholar." if it hung around him much longer, would preclude him ever being off their hands. The sight of William's steady if badly paid work was probably an extra source of his sense of personal failure, if he needed one. He would soon be too old to be apprenticed, this "studious, awkward and apparently energetic youth" as he remembers himself, and what else was

there?

Later when he was researching Burns's life he recognised their plights as being very similar. "I was placed like him in a remote and unfavourable situation and to all appearance doomed to abject servitude and toil. I felt the same ambitious impulse, resembling to use his fine expression, the groping of the blind Cyclops around his cave." This Cyclops never forgot the cave round which his fifteen year old self staggered, looking for any exit, absolutely anything. It made him of course perennially insecure, but it also made him exceptionally sensitive to the needs of other juvenile cave-groppers. It is interesting, and moving, that the experiences did not make him bitter or vengeful, or as in Dickens case morbidly neurotic. He simply gritted his teeth and vowed that somehow he would escape from, and would never return to, that cave.

Of course there were terribly black moments, even for a juvenile philosopher. He would sit by the tiny fire and be overcome by suicidal thoughts, and on one occasion came near to fulfilling them. He would take long night walks, often in the hopes of seeing an opening somewhere for him. One night, on his way home after one of these fruitless trails, the rain pouring down, his spirits at rock bottom, he threw himself down on the grass in Kings Park and added his tears to the general depressing wetness. He wished that he need never get up again, a sense of desperate desolation that even in the darkness attracted the attention of a passer by. Edinburgh's night streets and parks were full of the homeless and the hopeless, but there was something about this weeping boy that made the man stop and ask what was the matter. It was one of those casual encounters that are specially memorable, more so in retrospect. Young Robert Chambers was shaken out of his wild misery, "and I immediately rose and proceeded towards home." Wayside tavern though it might have been, it held his parents and his two brothers and sisters and something that passed as security.

That night of agony on the wet grass seemed to act as a sort of catalyst, because Robert now made the decision that was to change the lives of himself and William for ever. According to his own account "I resolved to take all the books which I had myself collected, together with all those belonging to my brother, and all that misfortune had left to my father -the whole amounting in value to two or three pounds - and expose them for sale in a small shop in Leith Walk, where there were already several similar dealers...My brother's actual acquaintance in connection with the business of book selling furnished me with additional encouragement."

That was how Robert described this momentous move; William saw it differently. "I had for some days been pondering on a scheme which might possibly help him out of his difficulties, provided he laid aside all ideas of false shame and unhesitatingly followed my directions...My suggestion was that abandoning all notions of securing employment as a clerk, teacher, or anything else, and stifling every emotion which had hitherto buoyed him up, he should in the humblest possible style begin the business of a bookseller. The idea of such an enterprise had passed through his own mind, but had been laid aside as wild and ridiculous..."

These words were written after Robert's death, and after many years of painful quarrels and relentless driftings apart. William could have been trying to re-sort the past, and present himself as the one who had the "bright idea." He could simply, as we all do, have allowed memory to do some rearranging and really believed his version. The actual case may have been that they turned ideas over

between them and this was one and no one really remembered who thought of it first. Although it had such enormous consequences, it was not anything but a palliative at the time. It could have ended nowhere; Leith Walk was a sort of market place, with stalls of all kinds, and none of the other young men hawking their wares from the pavement turned into successful publishers, authors, landholders, Provosts. The reasons for their success must be looked for in their own characters, though luck obviously played a part. All sorts of factors were involved, which will be examined; just as they were involved in the instant stupendous success of the **Journal** at a time when there were many similar publications around.

"I therefore in July 1819 presented my little stock to the public" wrote Robert, around his seventeenth birthday which was on the 10th. The little stock contained a lot of old Bibles amongst it, though the one that had been in the family for two hundred years and preserved their history was held back. He had a small shop behind his stall, where he lived, and its position was on the junction with Pilrig Avenue. It was at this spot that Carlyle later had his mystic experience, when after a long period of depression, he experienced an inward turning around, and could at last say Yes to life.

It is easy to imagine Robert's feelings as he stood behind his row of rather battered volumes that July morning; but whatever they were to start with they soon turned to "infinite surprise" when he found himself the richer for eleven or twelve shillings at the end of the day. His parents when he went home and showed them the "actual money" were staggered, and William "completely overjoyed." decided to move in with him. They were as frugal as they had always been, though at the end of the first year Robert treated himself once a month to a seat at the theatre. "My more aesthetic brother" frowned on this extravagance. The characters of the two began to show the differences which were later to cast a blight on their relationship, but their iron determination not to let anything interfere with their climb out of poverty they shared and sustained.

"The only thing that ever gave me any pain was being seen occasionally in my little shop by old school fellows", a natural sense of humiliation on the part of a sensitive teenager. He pretended not to know them, horrified that they might identify him with the other broken down entrepreneurs around him. Towards these last he contrived "to preserve a certain distance" without causing them offence, or so he claimed. He wanted "no paltry friendships to clog my skirts"; he felt himself different, superior, and showed it. The mask was still on, the "real" Robert Chambers just faintly visible behind it. He could not have endeared himself to his fellow shop keepers, and though the success of the enterprise was evident, it was not exactly a halcyon period.

Yet there must have been much in the way of diversion and entertainment for him as he waited for customers. Leith Walk led from the docks (very busy in those days) to the city, and its mile length was thronged with sailors, merchants newly arrived, visitors to the capital, strollers enjoying its sideshows, and "a multiplicity of odd looking dependents on public charity - such as old blind fiddlers, seated by the wayside; sailors deficient in a leg or an arm, with long queues hanging down their backs, who were always singing ballads about sea-fights; and cripples of various sorts who contrived to move along in wooden bowls, or in low-wheeled vehicles drawn by dogs." Beggars and street performers crowded all the main thoroughfares of Edinburgh, but Leith Walk was particularly popular with them because of the sailors with money to spend, and the merchants presumed to be rich.

Robert in his **Traditions of Edinburgh** described it fifty years before as being even more "colourful." "From top to bottom it was a scene of wonders and enjoyments peculiarly devoted to children. Besides the panoramas and caravan shows, which might be considered as regular fixtures and part of the country cousin sights of Edinburgh.. Who can forget the waxworks of Mrs Sands widow of the late G Sands" which occupied a laigh shop opposite to the present Haddington Place and at the door of which besides various parrots and sundry birds of Paradise, sat the wax figure of a little man in the dress of a French courtier of the ancient regime, reading one eternal copy of the Edinburgh Advertiser? All along the Walk it was one delicious scene of squirrels hung out at doors, and monkeys dressed like soldiers and sailors, with holes behind where their tails came through." The squirrels and monkeys might have disputed, along with the "various parrots" and "sundry birds of Paradise", the fun that was being had, but they gave to the place a fairground feel that it still possessed, in a modified way. when William and Robert set up their stalls there. As late as 1859 Robert was taking his own daughter to see "wild beasts" on Leith Walk.

"Late on a Saturday evening in May 1819, my apprenticeship came to a close, and I walked away with five shillings in my pocket" wrote William; taking up the story; and this after five years of work and garret living. His employer actually offered to keep him on "at a reasonable salary", not disclosed, but "Whether influenced by my father's harangues about independence or by my own natural instincts, I had formed the resolution to be my own master." James Chambers was not exactly a shining example of the advantages of going it alone, and it is unlikely that William took any notice of his lectures on the subject. He could not really understand or justify his decision. "My resolution therefore to fight my way, inch by inch, was I acknowledge an eccentricity."

Robert's modest success encouraged him, but Robert had also cornered the market in old books; but fortunately an agent for a London publisher had just arrived in Edinburgh, bringing cheap editions of popular works, long out of copyright, and also remaindered works with a new and "flashy exterior". This enterprising gentleman held a trade sale in the usual way; invited book sellers to a noted tavern, sent round wine decanters, provided catalogues for the books to be sold and circulated to the assembled buyers specimen copies. It was all very relaxed, "conducted with a blending of fun and conviviality", with the odd toast and even a song or two from anyone who would oblige.

William was acting as an assistant, having been recommended by a bookseller he knew, and the trade sale was very cheerful; "Mr Robert Miller...told his drollest anecdotes, whistled tunes with the delicacy of a flageolet, and sung his best songs as few men can sing them." As a result of this process, "there was a large sale effected" and the next day when William returned to help pack the unsold works, the agent allowed him ten pounds worth of whatever he fancied on credit. "That" as William recalled, "was a turning point in my life." He packed the books into a tea chest, and borrowed a trolley from the hotel to ferry them to Leith Walk.

Then it was simply a question of buying a few wooden planks (with the five shillings he had in hand from his five years apprenticeship) and setting up a trestle to display his wares, the smaller volumes in front, the larger ones behind, with pamphlets "stuck alluringly between." There had been plenty of bookstalls displaying old editions in the city, but his, "done up in boards, with white back titles, as was then the prevailing fashion", made a dashing and original show. His first sale was five volumes of Robertson's **History of Charles V** which he carried back in the evening to the purchaser's house; a common practice of shopkeepers for all commodities.

So like Robert's, his little enterprise slowly expanded. His next step was to save money by buying books in sheets and binding them himself. But there was always, especially in Edinburgh, the problem of wet days when the books had to be brought in, and there were few customers anyway. To fill in the time profitably, William bought a finely pointed crow pen and some smooth paper, specially ruled, and embarked on calligraphy, producing poems and selections of prose to be sold for albums. He remembered a poor retired naval officer who had done this a few years before, and sold his resulting memoirs for five shillings; neither he nor Robert ever forgot anything that could be profitably learnt from and copied, however trivial it seemed at the time. It was one of the secrets of their success.

At the end of a year he was able to move to larger premises, though his own quarters were minimally furnished, with brown paper instead of curtains round the bed. Now he could invite in the many aspiring poets in which Edinburgh abounded, most of them destined to do no more than aspire owing to their poverty and lack of patronage. A typical case was John Donovan, who had been a porter and midshipman, wretchedly poor but "always overflowing with allusions to Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Leigh Hunt." He was burning with reforming zeal as well, and edited a weekly paper called **The Patriot**, one of whose articles William remembered as opening with the memorable phrase, "Day follows day, and chain follows chain." William contributed three quite radical articles himself, as did Robert, but the paper made little money; earned a little in a "den" coffee roasting, where the kindly Sir Walter sometimes looked in for a chat. He died young and unknown, an example of the talented uneducated class whom William and Robert strove all their lives to help.

The crow pen was a help, but how much more efficient would be a printing press, when pamphlets and other simple works could be turned out twice as fast. So for the cost of three pounds William embarked on the business on which he was to spend his life and make a fortune. As usual he called to mind a past success; a pocket edition of Burns's songs produced by another printer, a book now hard to find. So singing the ballads as he went, he printed out a similar volume.

Typically he was able to rely on information he had picked up by chance in his apprentice days. He had been sent errands to the printing office of a Mr Ruthven, and there while waiting had watched the compositors at work and stored away the memory, now to be used as the occasion demanded. It was slow work, but also immensely exciting. Nothing again quite matched the thrill of turning out his first impression on his ancient press. Indeed he admitted to a kind of "infatuation" with the machine, waking on moonlight nights to see its silvery outline beside his bed, as a lover might dote on the form of a mistress beside him, rising at dawn to rush to its side and perform his loving ministrations.

However producing the volume of poems was tedious; to arrive at seven hundred and fifty copies he had to pull the handles of the press twenty thousand times. When it was finished it needed a cover in the form of a wood engraving. Then appeared another of the talented but desperate members of the community, Peter Fyfe, dressed in a second hand black suit with a white neckcloth arranged to cover his shabby shirt. He had been a weaver's reed maker, but like so many other redundant craftsmen, had drifted to the city in the hope of work. He knew nothing of lithography, but in spite of hardships was full of cheerful confidence and produced a design of national emblems. The whole edition was sold for nine pounds.

William of course did not squander this windfall. He bought "from an aged printer with a decaying business" some new types, so that he could print out "Notice" or "Dog Found"; most successfully in letters four inches long "To Let" to hang outside houses. His own shack remained unfurnished, without water, which he bought daily from a barrel on a cart which clopped past every morning, the driver blowing a long tin horn to announce his arrival. The water was "not very good" and was doubtless the source of many of the diseases of the time, including cholera and typhoid.

To William's shop, to sit and gossip and generally pass the long day, came the characters about whom Robert wrote later with tender amusement; old pensioners remembering long ago battles; "decayed sea captains" trying year after year to get jobs as harbour masters; broken down shop keepers or traders and unsuccessful gamblers; all wanting to get out of the rain and find somebody to talk to. William gave them a seat but was too busy to listen to them. He was being given orders of Rules for Friendly and Burial Societies, and one very good line of business was with a lady pawnbroker. She was fifty years old, and had made her name running a tavern in South Bridge Street where she served a dish called Golli Gosperado which everyone found irresistible; "the happy inventor retired from the trade with so much money that she was able to set up as a pawnbroker." She had a servant called Pawkie who attended her all her life and was with her when she died. Of such characters William and Robert made Victorian Scotland come alive, a world of the less successful, the once arrived but now ruined, the never quite arriving but always hopeful.

One of the providers of letters for his press was an old printer who used to rest his legs on walks past the shop, and whose story was a strange one; he had been a shepherd boy, and while whittling away at wood with his penknife, making letters and figures while he watched the flock, he had been observed by the local minister. The boy's skill had so impressed this kindly gentleman, that he had sent him to Edinburgh to be trained as a printer. There he had been noticed by none other than Benjamin Franklin on his second visit to Scotland in 1771, who again was much impressed, and offered to take him to Philadelphia and set him up. For family reasons he had been unable to take up this promising offer, but had stayed to found his own business and eventually tell his story to young William Chambers as an example of how a few lucky chance glances could change a life.

Meanwhile at nineteen, Robert was discovering literary talent "which came upon him like an inspiration" according to William, and never deserted him. With their joint skills, they decided to produce a periodical, Robert writing and editing, William printing and publishing. In the days before mass circulation newspapers such weekly or monthly publications could be both popular and lucrative, and they hoped for both. They called it after a new toy invented by David Brewster, the Kaleidoscope, and brought in their young brother James to help in the arduous battle to get the printing machine to churn it out once a fortnight.

While William coped with the hammering out, stitching together, and generally physically presenting the paper, Robert wrote all its articles, a great many of them about the people he knew best, the Victims of a cruel and uncaring society, his work then and always "marked by that sympathy for the unfortunate which characterised my brother through life." These people continued to draw from him through his maturity his most moving work. Nobody else has so vividly revealed this sub class, and in The Kaleidoscope he brings one before us for the first time.

This was an aspiring poet called Stewart Lewis, who arrived at their home in Portobello one evening, shabby and fervent, carrying a small volume of poems and accompanied by a wife now "sorrow broken" but the pair of them "addressed each other by terms of endearment as strong and spoke with as great an affection, as they had done on their marriage day." Later Robert visited them in their "wretched abode" in one of the foetid closes of the city, and handed over a little money that he had received for the sale of a few copies of the poems. Immediately a son was sent off to spend most of it on whisky, which it turned out was one of the causes of the poet's downfall, or perhaps his only consolation.

A short time afterwards Lewis's sorrow-broken wife died, and he arrived at Portobello in a state of distraction, waited for several hours to see Robert, and left a piece of paper on which was written, in characters which strayed over the whole page" the words; "My dear sir, I am mad. Stewart Lewis." He remained mad, roaming all over Scotland and northern England, lamenting his wife in endless poems, and died of exhaustion and probable starvation, one of the innumerable gifted failures brought vividly to life by Robert's pen.

The Kaleidoscope quickly folded but William philosophically described this as "a trial of one's wings." The concluding number appeared on January 12th 1822 exactly ten years before their strengthened wings launched them into the profitable spheres of their **Edinburgh Journal**. Meanwhile their "funny, scheming, struggling" existence had got them to the point when they could leave their trestles and stall, and move into the more prestigious New Town. After four years Robert's stock was worth £200, and William's much the same, and they moved to India Place and Broughton Street respectively. The worst was over, but they still had their improvident father to reckon with, and he was to cause them one more financial headache before he died.

While his sons were making slow but steady progress up the ladder of success, their father James Chambers was sinking deeper into a state of melancholy despair, bordering on insanity. As William puts it "Afflicted with dreary recollections, sometimes half-distracted, and ready to catch at delusive hopes", his unsteady mind caught at a last hope; the reclaiming of a property which he felt was rightly his. "The property in question was a wretched old house, perhaps not worth £200", but it represented for James Chambers status and something, after all his losses, to call his own. To his sons' horror he proposed to fight for it in the Court of Session. For advice he went to a "legal oracle", whose picture William paints for us; "a neat little man, in drab breeches and white woollen stockings, who laboured under the infirmity of a stiff crooked knee, on which account he walked very oddly, by successive jerks, with the help of a stick." He had a shop selling wines and spirits, but because he had read Erskines Institutes, and was a kindly soul, he handed out legal advice free to anyone who happened to need it, hoping they would take away a bottle of his liquor at the same time.

Scotland's legal system was its pride, and to succeed within it was to become rich and famous. Many hopeful, but untalented, men were trying to scramble up the ladder. Inevitably their progress was slow, and as many of them went backwards to oblivion as managed to find themselves pacing the prestigious precincts of Parliament House. John Heiton in his "**Castes of Edinburgh**" describes the working conditions of many of these aspiring Writers; "a rickety loft in Anchor Close where a white fir table, and an inkhorn, a whisky bottle, two or three steel pens, crooks, books...with a few old law

books" comprised their whole claim to be taken seriously. Heiton is scathing about the system as he sees it. "The people are beginning to realise that the Court of Session with its thirteen criminal judges, its army of Advocates and Agents, all living upon a poor country like Scotland, is a gigantic evil which must be abated."

James Chambers, still trusting after so many disappointments, was just what impecunious agents were looking for and the "legal oracle" was a useful middleman for them. His premises were also the meeting place of a "club of convivialists, who were in the habit of spending an hour or two daily in discussing public affairs over some inspiring liquid delicacies." Edinburgh abounded in such clubs, whose purpose was to fill in time in a cheerful way with fellow drinkers, but this one was open to anyone who could amuse the company with good jokes, however often they were told. Some members of the Excise Office were regulars "whose duties consisting mainly of drawing their salaries and reading the morning's newspaper" allowed them to repeat their funny stories endlessly. As it was one of the rules of the club to laugh at a joke however often it had been repeated, the club was a haven for bores.

James Chambers went there to consult "the smart little man with the crooked knee" and was impressed by his knowledge of the law, especially as it was freely offered. He was handed on to another of the regulars, "a man of advanced age, who wore a brown duffel greatcoat, and a low-crowned hat, whose function consisted in bringing cases to certain practitioners before the supreme courts." William categorised this character as a "legal jackal"; he had soon passed on the trusting James to a "practitioner" who would arrange to present his case at court, dragging out the process until the last shilling had been wrung from him.

These shady dealers were well known around the law courts at Parliament House, and had been given names such as Pillage and Plunder; often they took their sons into their businesses with them, so that there was an Old Plunder and a Young Plunder, and the same for the Pillages; indeed they were reputed to be one firm, though with such names it is hard to understand how they did any business. There were always some foolish simpletons like James Chambers around though and in his case the lawsuit was lost quite quickly when the money ran out. It more than ran out, there were large expenses to be paid, and who else to turn to than William and Robert?

William was sitting at his desk working, when "a person of shabby appearance" was shown in, with the message that his father wanted to see him, at an address in George Street. There he found James sitting on a sofa in the house of a sheriff officer, to all intents and purposes a prisoner unless a debt of thirty five pounds thirteen shillings and fourpence was paid forthwith. If the money was not handed over James Chambers would be imprisoned, not in the "homely old Tolbooth" but in the grim new gaol on Calton Hill.

The sheriff officer left the two alone together, and as William sat opposite his father, his head in his hands, a terrible wave of bitter memories washed over him; all the disasters of the past, brought on by this hopelessly inadequate man; the humiliations they had caused to his family; William and Robert's long struggles to retrieve the family fortunes, and "most distracting of all, my mother's heroic exertions" running taverns in parts of the city quite unsuitable for one gently bred." He was speechless with anger on all their accounts, but his father said placidly "You can of course help me? I daresay you have saved a little money." He could not answer, but he rang for the sheriff officer, paid the amount, and watched his father walk free.

Unfortunately that was not the end of the business; there were other debts to pay, and James Chambers had to go into hiding while his sons tried to sort out the mess. There in November 1824 he died, while fires raged round him, a conflagration that blazed for a week and destroyed many of the city's houses. He was fifty one years old. It was a shabby end, and William expressed no sorrow; he blamed his father's troubles on "inconsiderateness and want of moral courage" and seemed unable to forgive him.

Robert took a gentler view. After the debacle of the failed lawsuit, he described his father as "this unhappy man, whose prospects in the world were originally of the brightest, as his intellect was among the best, and his honour the most unimpeachable", an "amiable and injured man, to whom I was indebted for so much instruction and observation." Here as so often in his later life, he showed a forgiving spirit, overlooking the faults and remembering the best qualities, and grateful when gratitude was little to be expected.

Now he had to see most of the profits from his first book, "**Traditions of Edinburgh**", disappear to pay his father's debts, but this he felt less than the pleasure and pride his father took in the work when it was carried to him in his dingy lodging, where he was taking refuge from his creditors. James Chambers wept over the book with pride and relief, but was too far gone with a "bilious distemper", to enjoy his son's success. As later successes crowded on him, Robert always regretted that they came too late to comfort his father: a man he remembered to admire and love, for all his failings. and the memory of whose death, alone in a "lowly lodging" in a dark city alleyway, stayed to grieve him.

It was an end and a beginning, for with the publication of "**Traditions of Edinburgh**" Robert arrived on the literary scene, never to leave it until a year before his death. It was, as he admitted, a slight book, well padded with anecdote. It showed him, a young man of twenty two, to be original and observant, for much of its contents was the result of his prowling the streets, noticing buildings, talking to old people; much was gathered from the famous antiquarian and eccentric, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe. The story of its writing is worth lingering over, but a slight digression allows us to glimpse him in a more predictable role; a young man posturing in front of several young women.

In the same year as his father's death, Robert endured the pain of losing his first love; if love is the correct term to use about a relationship that is only tenuously evident in the letters and memoirs. From his nineteenth year, he had been visiting a family called Cross, who lived on the other side of the Firth of Forth; a widow and her three daughters and a Miss Sophia Johnstone who was probably an adopted relative. The few letters that survive are those of a very young man, showing off in front of a bevy of pretty women, but one of them, Leila, also merited poems, and much later was the only outsider mentioned in Robert's will. She made an unfortunate marriage and he helped her financially, but not a breath of scandal was connected with the relationship.

In one letter, the very young man lays bare to the older woman the complex nature he feels is special to him; "there are certainly two souls or principles of emotion within me, which alternately govern and direct my sentiments...the pen which I use is the same, the hand with which I write is the same, I look around me and see the same objects which I saw yesterday yet my whole current of thoughts is changed...Can I who one evening took a hot poker and going round my room burnt the numerous cobwebs about its corners, sending the houseless tenants across the walls on a march of

destruction...can I who did that be the same person who at an earlier age, frequently gave to lame sailors the stored halfpenny which I had treasured..." Is he really dismayed by this Jekyll and Hyde situation, or just enjoying the stripping bare of his character in front of Mrs Cross and her daughters? According to William, he was genuinely enamoured of Leila, but a letter of July 21 1824 shows why nothing came of it.

This is one of the very few angry letters to come to light. It is in answer to one accusing him of not paying back money lent to him. "I remember very distinctly that the first instalment or payment I made was in silver which I gave you one evening in your dining room at Smith Place, it was just getting dark and we sat conversing a good while before candles were brought. The chief subject of our conversation was the then increasing dullness of my own business on account of the decay of Leith Walk." She had counselled him to be patient and hope for improvement. "You also expressed unwillingness to take my portion of my debt at that time as you was in no need of the money but at last I prevailed on you to accept it." This was in fact an instalment of a pound, and another pound was paid in a letter "the strain of which was acknowledgment of your kindness, expressed in terms of the most ardent gratitude, highly disproportioned to the occasion." The letter was handed over to her in person, but now in a real huff he says that "a pound is to me a mere drop in the bucket, that it is not worth the disputing about" and on Sunday "I will subject myself to the very disagreeable measure of calling at your house" to hand over what she says is due. Obviously he could not go on courting the daughter of a woman who accused him of shabby behaviour, almost dishonesty. Three years afterwards he married, and Leila disappeared from his life until years later when she came to him for help.

The Dark Ages, so brooded over and embellished by William, Robert tried to banish from his memory, though he did often moralise in his writings on the theme that anyone could be successful with hard work and frugal dedication. One speculates that his intense activity was the result of a fear of the unguarded moment, a vacuum into which the past might rush. However William worked almost as hard, and with him the past was something to savour and display, to be proud of, to congratulate himself on. Speculation in their case is sterile. They were different, they reacted differently for a variety of reasons beyond definition. Both worked untiringly to better the condition of the young, and in that their experience united them.