

Robert Davidson: A Biography.

We know little about the life of Robert Davidson, ‘The Morebattle Poet’. Although the anonymous author(s) of *The History of Morebattle and District* (1966) shows a first hand familiarity with Davidson’s poems, no living tradition about his life and work appears otherwise to have survived in the locality.ⁱ What we do know derives primarily from the short autobiography with which Davidson prefaced his third and final collection of poems *Leaves From A Peasant’s Cottage Drawer* (1848).ⁱⁱ

Though brief, Davidson’s account of his life is unusual and valuable. This is because in his time very few people who undertook hard physical labour for their livelihood ever managed to write down for posterity their own accounts of their lives. History does not normally speak to us through the writings of people like Robert Davidson – people who lived their lives in poverty and often on the edge of utter destitution and who, like Davidson, ended their days as recipients of parish relief.ⁱⁱⁱ Normally, we hear about people in such circumstances only when they get spoken for by others. And so, if their point of view ever gets heard at all, it gets heard only indirectly and indistinctly. We are fortunate therefore that we have Davidson to tell us his thoughts about the times in which he lived and, since he is an accomplished poet, to tell us about his *feelings* for the people and the places in the district that he loved.

Davidson wrote his autobiography in 1847, “his seventieth year”.^{iv} In it he tells us that having begun his working life as a cowherd, he then became a ploughman, then a “day-labourer”, then again a ploughman and finally a “day-labourer” once more – the occupation which he “greatly preferred”. It is perhaps worth exploring in a little detail what it meant to live a life like Davidson’s, what it meant to undertake these different forms of employment and why Davidson changed between them in the way that he did. This may help us understand better both the context and the content of his poems.

As a ploughman or *hind* in the Roxburghshire of his day, Davidson’s contract of employment would have been based on the ‘Boll Wage’. That is, much the greater part of his wages would have been paid yearly and ‘in kind’. In the 1840s, the value of his wage would have been approximately £25.8 *per annum* but only about 20% of this (about £5) would have been paid in ready cash. The rest was paid in oatmeal (10 or 12 bolls), barley (3 or 4 bolls) and peas or beans (1 or 2 bolls) – a ‘Kelso Boll’ being 6 bushels in weight. In addition, the hind got between 600 & 1700 yards of free, manured potato ground, free carriage of up to 4 tons of coal, the keep of a cow and a ‘free’ cottage in return for 18 or 20 days labour from a female worker or *bondager*. Other traditional elements in this yearly contract – enough ground to sow a capful of lint or flax seed, ground to keep chickens, knife-sharpening corn, ‘sheep siller’ etc were commuted to cash payments at various points in time.

By contrast, the agricultural “day-labourer” was paid a weekly wage in cash. This is probably what attracted Davidson – liberty being a key theme in several of his poems. Employment as a “day-labourer” gave him much greater freedom to dispose of his income as he wished. In good years & seasons, the real value of the hind & day-labourer’s wages were more or less the same (the day-labourer earning perhaps slightly more than the hind) but the day-labourer could spend (or save) his income exactly as he pleased. In ill years & seasons, however, the greater security of the hind’s wages ‘in kind’ asserted itself – and so we see Davidson reverting to this mode of employment in the bad years following 1811.

Of course, the balance of advantages and disadvantages here were marginal and the facts of life for people in Davidson's circumstances could be extremely brutal indeed. A short period out of work of a few weeks or months because of injury or illness or for whatever reason could quickly wipe out the careful savings of years, visiting catastrophe upon the families of even the most sober, thrifty and industrious workmen.

It is not for nothing that from time to time Davidson describes Scotland as "*The Land o' Cakes*" – i.e. the land of *oatcakes* - in his poems. The diet of agricultural workers like him was monotonous and poor. It was almost always porridge or potatoes (though not necessarily always in that order) morning, noon and night. As the *Report of the Royal Commission on Lunatic Asylums* of 1857 states:

In the rural districts of the Lowlands, oatmeal and potatoes constitute the chief part of the diet of the peasantry, with the addition of milk and garden vegetables. Bread is occasionally used, but butcher-meat very seldom forms part of the living.

According to this same *Report*, those from amongst the very poorest in rural society, the aged and infirm of body or of mind, those who could not perform hard physical work and who had no one to support them subsisted, in so far as they were able to get them, more or less exclusively upon potatoes. This was a starvation diet at the best of times and the failure of the potato crop from blight in the years 1846-57 must have caused considerable privation and distress not only in Ireland and in the Highlands but also in such relatively prosperous agricultural districts as the Borders. It may well have been to something like this diet that Davidson was reduced when living in his declining years with his daughter Christian, his son in law George Smith, their nine children and two others in the shepherd's cottage at Upper Chatto.

In Davidson's time, housing and sanitation were simply awful for the vast majority of people living in Scotland. *The Report of Royal Commission on the Poor Law (Scotland)* of 1844 described a typical hind's cottage in Roxburghshire as follows:

Of one apartment with a little porch inside, divided by the box beds into two areas, one for living and one for storing lumber: it had no ceiling but matting laid over the rafters.

As late as 1893, *The Report on the Agricultural Labourer, Scotland (Roxburghshire & Berwickshire)* stated that:

Privies are conspicuous by their absence or, if present, by their non-use for the purposes for which they were intended. Here again, old habits die hard, but men so very often complain now of the want of them, and say they consider there ought to be one to each house.

With dire living conditions such as these it is not surprising to find Davidson writing poems on such themes as the *Visitation of the Cholera* or to find that many of his poems – *Churchyard Musings, On Visiting the Grave of a Young Friend, A Mother's Lament for the Death of an Infant Son, Epitaphs* - are reflections upon untimely death and loss.

We catch a glimpse of Davidson living at Morebattle in the 1841 Census of the parish. It is not possible, from the way the Census was taken, to determine exactly where he lived in the village. From the Census information as presented, the best guess is that he was living somewhere in the little lane off Teapot Street that runs behind and parallel to Main Street. There is no reason to suppose that the cottages there or anywhere else in the village were very much better than those available to hinds on the farms. In Morebattle house number 20 on the Census we find the following inhabitants: John Oliver (Mason); his wife Agnes; his aged mother Mary and his four young children; William Melrose (Carrier) and his wife Janet; Jacob Entwistle (Tailor), his wife Sophia and infant son Jonathan; Robert Davidson (Day-Labourer), his wife Christian and their son Robert – a total of three families and sixteen people of all ages in a cottage which may have been little more than a ‘but and ben’. With overcrowding like this, it is a wonder that Davidson ever found himself alone with his thoughts long enough even simply to write them down.

Given the much-vaunted qualities of a traditional Scottish education, it is interesting that in his autobiography Davidson describes his late eighteenth century schooling as being “paltry”. More interesting still is his account of how the meagre ration afforded him was supplemented. The auld wives spinning yarn and telling the local children the Border tales by their firesides, the kindly farmer allowing Davidson free range of the books and newspapers of what was presumably a subscription “country library” provided our poet with a window upon the world which the dominie at his local school could not.^v

Given the apparently low educational standards in the village of his day, it is perhaps surprising therefore that, as Davidson says, “very few cottages were without Boston’s and Erskine’s works”. Few modern readers will have the stamina, the philosophical or theological training to make much sense of books like Thomas Boston’s *Human Nature in its Fourfold Estate* (1720). And yet here we see the long dissenting tradition of the Scottish Church being sustained not only by the *spoken* word, by the exhortations and sermons of its charismatic preachers, but also by a people thoroughly familiar with the *written* word in which the great theological questions of the day were being discussed. What today now seem to us bafflingly obscure points of religious doctrine once divided Scottish communities to the point of violence – as Davidson’s poem *The Ordination* shows – and Morebattle was ever in the thick of it. The Halls of nearby Haughhead and the Bennets of Grubet & Marlefield were amongst the leading Scottish Covenanting families of the seventeenth century. The Gateshaw Brae gatherings of the eighteenth century sustained this vigorous dissenting tradition in the locality. In Davidson’s day and for a long time beforehand, Morebattle was a place in which people took their religion extremely seriously. Not only were the people willing to *fight* for their religion, they were also more than willing to expend considerable effort *reading* about it as well.^{vi}

In his autobiography, Davidson mentions no literary influences other than the national poet himself, Robert Burns, of whom Davidson says he had never heard until some “two years after his death” (i.e. not until 1798 when Davidson was already twenty years of age) and ‘Blind Harry’ whose story in verse of the *Life of Sir William Wallace* was once said to have been the most popular book in Scotland after the Bible. Ben Jonson (1572-1637) is however quoted at the end of Davidson’s autobiography and Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774) is admired as a “great poet”.^{vii}

It is perhaps not too difficult to see the influence of a poem like Goldsmith's famous *The Deserted Village* in Davidson's *On Visiting the Scenes of Bygone Days* and to this extent it may be said that Davidson's poetic talent is the product of much careful study of past masters in the arts of versifying just as much as it is the result of many long years of practice in these same arts. Other clues in the autobiography hint at this. Davidson tells us that he was composing poems in his head from an early age and while labouring at the plough but that he never wrote any of his poems down until after he was married. He tells us that he destroyed all his manuscripts not once but twice. Everything in Davidson's autobiography suggests a writer consciously trying to live up to the highest possible standards. We are not looking at the work of an uneducated man here. We are looking at a man who was self-educated to a very high standard – and who carefully measured his work against the very best that he knew.

What else may be gleaned from Davidson's autobiography? He tells us that at the age of ten (i.e. in 1788) he was herding cows because "the country was then almost unenclosed". The Old and New Statistical Accounts of the relevant parishes would seem to suggest that this date for enclosure is rather late, the agricultural revolution and the fencing in of the traditional open fields being already under way for a decade and more in the Borders. As the reader will discover, many of Davidson's poems reflect the social tensions which this huge set of changes caused in the rural life of Scotland. The fact that, like many others, Davidson's family did not prosper from these changes – and may indeed have been seriously disadvantaged by them - makes his point of view informative and important. The reader of the poems will see how well Davidson weighs and balances his judgments upon the matters in question. While several of Davidson's poems refer approvingly to certain landlords, clergymen and others in similar positions, the Dedication which Davidson wrote to accompany *Leaves* – "To the Working Men of the Border" - shows us where his sympathies broadly lay. His view of life is perhaps best summed up in his *Epistle to William Bennet*:

The means of human happiness

Are very equal shared;

For when we right consider a',

We find the distance is but sma',

'Tween cottars and the laird.

What do we know of Davidson's reputation? Davidson received a short accolade from Alexander Jeffrey in volume iv of his *History & Antiquities of Roxburghshire* (1864) pp. 370-1:

Apart from his poems, his life presents one of the finest specimens of a genuine true-hearted Scottish peasant. His verses are marked with a good deal of humour and occasionally by felicity of expression worthy of a higher master of the art of rhyme. The moral sentiments of his graver pieces are of the happiest kind.

Sir George Douglas makes a passing reference to “the idyllic strains of Robert Davidson” in his *History of the Border Counties of Roxburghshire, Selkirkshire & Peeblesshire* (1896) p.428. Again, James Tait in volume one of his *Two Centuries of Border Church Life* (1889) pp.136-7 makes mention of one of Davidson’s poems - *The Ordination* – a poem which humorously describes the riot that accompanied the induction of the Reverend James Christie to Morebattle Church in 1725. (Tait here also mentions the fact that Davidson was for a time a member of the Secession Church in Morebattle). Finally, the Reverend Charles Rogers in *The Scottish Minstrel* (1885) p.245 adds some approbatory notes to the life and work of Davidson:

Many of his poems are powerful both in expression and sentiment. In private life he was sober, prudent and industrious.

As for the rest, “there is nought but the silent condescension of history”. Professor William Veitch’s *History and Poetry of the Scottish Border* (1878) – an otherwise admirably well-informed and comprehensive collection – says nothing. The Reverend W. S Crockett’s *Berwickshire and Roxburghshire* (1926) contains a *Roll of Honour* chapter which includes the names of a number of Border poets but which omits Davidson. Given that Crockett had previously published a poetry collection entitled *Minstrelsy of the Merse: the Poets and Poetry of Berwickshire* in 1893, a volume which demonstrates the author’s close familiarity with the subject of Border poets, this oversight by an otherwise learned and careful scholar suggests that Davidson’s name fell quickly into obscurity. This is a judgement confirmed by the recent publication of Walter Elliot’s *New Border Minstrelsy* (2006). When in the Scottish Borders the peerless and indefatigable Walter Elliot disnae mind your name, you really have been forgotten!

What has subsequent research discovered about Davidson? We can now confirm that, as both Jeffrey and Rogers (op. cit.) noted, Robert Davidson was born at Lempitlaw in the parish of Sprouston in the year 1778.^{viii} His father, Robert Davidson, was an ‘indweller’ at Lempitlaw. His mother’s maiden name was Janet Stirling.

Robert the poet was the eldest of five brothers and one sister: William, James, Henry, Richard and Isabel. William joined the Royal Navy. He was with Nelson at the Battle of the Nile. He lost his leg in an engagement off the Spanish coast, was pensioned off and became a revenue collector at Malta. He died while returning to Scotland to end his days and is buried at Kelso. James became a trumpeter in a cavalry regiment. His horse’s head was shot off by a cannonball at Waterloo, severely injuring him in the face. Eventually retiring from the army, James lived at Kelso. Both William and James were cited for bravery. Richard emigrated to Canada.^{ix} The strongly patriotic and military themes of such Davidson poems as *Anna & Malcolm*, *The Laurels of Scotland* and *The Mountains of Spain* may well be informed by the experience of Robert’s brothers in the service of their country.

Robert the poet married Christian Richardson. They had seven children: Robert (b. 1800); Janet (b.1802); James (b.1806); Isabella (b.1809); Christian (b.1811); William (b. 1813) and John (b 1817). John died in infancy in 1818. Isabella died aged 10 in 1819. It would be Robert, James and William therefore who were the three sons whom Davidson mentions in his autobiography as having emigrated to America.

Rogers (op. cit.) states that Robert the poet died in Hounam Parish in 1855 (exactly where he does not say). The Census of Hounam Parish for 1851 supports this contention. It records Robert Davidson, 'labourer', living with his daughter Christian and his son in law George Smith, 'shepherd', at Upper Chatto. Hounam churchyard contains the still legible gravestone of this Smith family. It lists a son of George and Christian, one John Smith, whom it says "died at Fly Creek Otsigo Co. N. America 7.7.1888".^x Reasoning that this John Smith, a grandson of the poet, just might have gone to join his uncles Robert, James or William who were already settled in America, the search for Davidson's sons and their descendants consequently focussed upon this Otsego County (which upon enquiry was located in New York State, USA).

And there Davidson's descendants were found. The Davidson family historian Barbara Lucas still lives nearby at Latham in New York State. She has been able to confirm many of the details in this introduction and has added very considerably to our understanding of the family. Many of the poet's descendants have distinguished themselves in their choice of careers. Two have served their adopted country with great distinction.

Captain Andrew Davidson, son of James Davidson (b.1806) and grandson of the poet was born at Morebattle on 12 February 1840 and went to the USA with his family in 1846. Whilst a First Lieutenant, he served with the 30th U.S. Colored Troops – one of the first black regiments in the Union army. He won the Congressional Medal of Honor for gallantry at the Battle of the Mines, Petersburg, July 1864 (an action recreated in the opening scenes of the 2003 Hollywood movie *Cold Mountain*). Rear Admiral Walter Bunn Davidson (1901–1971) likewise distinguished himself in combat with the Legion of Merit "for outstanding services during operations against the enemy in the Western Pacific". Amongst his other appointments, he was for a time Commander of the USN Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines.(Information lately received from Barbara Lucas identifies John Robson, Premier of the Canadian Province of British Columbia (1889-92), as a nephew of the poet).

Alexander Jeffrey concludes his entry on Robert Davidson in his *History & Antiquities of Roxburghshire* by saying that "it is not creditable to the admirers of peasant literature that no memorial marks the resting place of one who was an honour to his class and to the district in which he lived".^{xi} With the raising of a plaque on Morebattle churchyard wall to Davidson's memory and the republication of his *Leaves from a Peasant's Cottage Drawer* it is to be hoped that this deficiency has now been remedied.

David Welsh 2008.

The endnotes immediately below refer to the above introduction. The explanatory notes following the poems themselves and the asterisked * notes in the text belong to the original edition of *Leaves*.

ⁱ Information from Davidson Memorial Committee member Eileen Woodward strongly suggests that the individuals associated with this publication who were most likely to have been aware of Davidson and his work were Mr & Mrs Alec & Marie Mackie of Linton Schoolhouse. Mr Mackie taught history at Kelso High School and Mrs Mackie taught English. Both taught the author of this present introduction.

ⁱⁱ Although Davidson states in his autobiography that his second volume *Poems* was published in 1824, it was in fact printed at Jedburgh “for the author” by the well-known firm of W. Easton in 1825. Surviving copies of Davidson’s books are now extremely rare – which is of course a very good reason for this republication. No copies of the 1811 edition of his poems appear to have survived anywhere. The National Library of Scotland has a copy of both the 1825 *Poems* and the 1848 *Leaves* editions. Only two other copies of the 1825 *Poems* are known to survive – in university libraries in the USA. Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen & Newcastle University Libraries each has a single copy of *Leaves*. So has Scottish Borders Regional Archive. Another six copies of *Leaves* are held by university libraries in the United States. The Davidson Committee would be grateful for any information concerning other surviving copies.

ⁱⁱⁱ “He was often oppressed by poverty; and, latterly, was the recipient of parochial relief”, C. Rogers, *Scottish Minstrel* (1885), p.244.

^{iv} Alexander Somerville (1811-1885) of Berwickshire is sometimes said to have been the first working man anywhere to have published his autobiography – *Autobiography of a Working Man by One Who Has Whistled at The Plough* (1848) Somerville’s book was in fact published in the same year Davidson published *Leaves* – which would make Davidson’s reflections upon his life equally early. John Younger (1785–1860) of St Boswells, another vigorously opinionated working man from the Borders and a well-known writer and authority on angling, had his autobiography published some thirty or so years later in 1882 – *Autobiography of John Younger, Shoemaker, St Boswells* (though the period this describes (1785-1860) coincides to a large extent with that described by Davidson and so Younger supplies us with much useful material for comparison). ‘Celery’ Taylor (1803-1891) of Hounam Grange wrote a quite extraordinarily detailed account of his life in 1885 describing his early days in the Morebattle district (a period which again coincides to a large extent with the life of Davidson) before emigrating to the USA where, by introducing celery-growing to Kalamazoo (afterwards a major industry of that region), he acquired his nickname. This autobiography has never been published but is available on the internet (with many grievous spelling errors of place names to test the local knowledge of the reader) at: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~mikalama/celerytaylor01.htm>

^v Papers in the possession of Mr Neil Patterson of Morebattle show a Robert Davidson as having been a founder-member of the Morebattle Library at some point before the year 1824. A love of books and learning, acquired by Robert at an early age, was perhaps being passed on here.

^{vi} Popular disturbances in Lowland Scotland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were focused less upon such religious questions and more upon the kinds of everyday concerns which remain recognisable today. The tollgate riots in 1792 which were a protest against the introduction of road use charges (and which involved smashing and burning the gates on the new Berwickshire turnpikes at Duns, Paxton and Greenlaw) and the Kelso Bridge tollgate riot of 1854 are good examples. So were the anti-Militia riots which took place throughout Scotland and which caused acute anxiety in Government circles (comparisons being drawn with the ominous developments in revolutionary France). These disturbances began at Eccles in Berwickshire on 17 August 1797. Similar riots then took place at Lauder, Selkirk, Jedburgh and elsewhere in Scotland and they ended with twelve people being sabred and shot dead by the authorities at Tranent on 29 August, 1797 (one more than the number traditionally thought to have been killed at the better-known ‘Peterloo Massacre’ in Manchester, 1819). We can only imagine what the impact of such events might have been upon communities like Morebattle.

The *Roxburghshire Lieutenancy Book* of 1801 lists all those balloted into the Militia parish by parish (membership was decided by lot and the riots were directed principally against the parish schoolmasters whose task it was to keep lists of those chosen in the ballot and who had consequently been enrolled or conscripted into what was, in effect, a form of compulsory military service). Linton Parish lists a Robert Davidson ‘Hind’ working for a Mr Purves of Linton Burnfoot. No other Robert Davidson is listed in this or other nearby parishes and so, while it is possible that our Robert may have escaped the ballot altogether, this particular Militiaman may very well have been our poet.

These were the Militiamen who, once popular objections to their being raised had been overcome, took part in the famous ‘False Alarm’ of January 31, 1804 when the watch at Hume Castle mistook some heather burning on the moors near Scremerton for the signal of Napoleon’s invasion, set light to their own beacon and consequently raised the whole fighting men of the Border to arms. Sir Walter Scott gives us a fictionalised and characteristically good-humoured and stirring account of this event in *The Antiquary* (1816). Younger (see above) gives a more jaundiced and near-seditious version as seen from the point of view of one who served in the rank and file and who actually participated in the event.

^{vii} Several of Davidson’s poems such as, for example, *To a Redbreast* and *To a Swallow* remind the reader strongly of John Clare (1793-1864) and his collection *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life* (1820). Davidson does not acknowledge Clare as an influence however (any more than the younger man Clare admits of an influence of Davidson upon *him*). Neither does Davidson mention his near contemporary Border poets Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832); John Leyden (1775-1811) or ‘The Ettrick Shepherd’ James Hogg (1770-1835) – whose son acted as publisher for *Leaves*. The works of near contemporary poets with strong connections specifically to the Morebattle district - James Thomson (1700-1748) author of *The Seasons* – a seminal work of first rank importance in European art and literature (not to mention Thompson’s inspirational role in his nephew’s design for Edinburgh’s New Town and in helping precipitate the French Revolution of 1789) - and Thomas Pringle (1789-1834) of Blakelaw, the great anti-slavery campaigner (and a fellow religious dissenter) – are likewise never referred to by Davidson.

^{viii} It being the case that Davidson was born at Lempitlaw, the scene for his poem *The Witch's Cairn* is very likely to be *Witches' Cairn* on the adjacent farm of Kersquarter in Sprouston Parish (Ordnance Survey reference: NT774335). The recorded traditions of both Stichill and Mordington parishes (see the Old & New Statistical Accounts of Scotland for the relevant parishes) state that their *Witches Cairns* were the places where numerous unfortunates were burned alive in the great witch hunts which swept through the Scottish Borders in the seventeenth century. The original endnotes to this poem, incorporated at the back of the *Leaves* edition, tend very much to confirm this Kersquarter location: "the author informs the editor that this piece was suggested on seeing a stone near to where he tended cows in his youth, which tradition pointed out as the spot where those horrible tragedies of witch-burning were perpetrated". This lonely place on what was then the bleak and wind-swept Hadden Rig Common is now occupied by a dark and somewhat forbidding wood from whose little-visited northern edge magnificent views of Teviotdale, Tweeddale, Kelso and the Merse may nevertheless be obtained at sunset by those not in thrall to the superstitions of their ancestors. The surviving Sprouston Kirk Session Records for the 1640s do not record any of these actual witch burnings but (not that our poet appears to have known the involvement of his kinsman) they do record the name of the leading *warlock* in the village: *Dand Davidson*.

^{ix} Information from the Davidson Family Genealogy compiled by Margret Davidson Kellam and Barbara Lucas of Latham, New York State, USA.

^x For the full inscription see *Roxburghshire Monumental Inscriptions: Hounam & Linton* (1995) p.16 no. 61. This records James Smith's age at death as 19 years. Fly Creek Cemetery, Otsego County (Lot 314) records his age at death as 49 years.

^{xi} Jeffrey's judgement here has been the main spur to researching Davidson's life and to having his achievement appropriately commemorated. In the course of investigating his life, discovering the name of his wife (Christian Richardson) and the place of his death (Upper Chatto) has led only quite recently to identifying his family gravestone in Morebattle churchyard.(No. 163 in *Roxburghshire Monumental Inscriptions: Morebattle* (1997). The accompanying map on p.9 of this handbook shows clearly the exact location of Davidson's grave). The full inscription on Davidson's gravestone reads:

In memory of Christian Richardson spouse to Robert Davidson Morebattle who died 2.10.1843 aged 69 years also of their son John who died Nov. 1818 aged 14 months and of their daughter Isabel who died May 1819 aged 10 years also the above Robert Davidson who died at Upper Chatto 6. 4. 1855 aged 76 years.

So while Jeffrey was not correct in saying that Davidson had no memorial at all, he was correct in saying that Davidson had not been (and has not until now been) *commemorated as a poet* – a man who was "an honour to his class and to the district in which he lived".