Major Weir's Coach.

Researched by Andrew Leaver

"Smuggling was almost universal in Scotland, for people unaccustomed to imposts and regarding them as an unjust aggression upon their ancient liberties, made no scruple to elude them whenever it was possible to do so."

Walter Scott 1771 - 1832

In the early 18th century native Scot's regarded the term 'smuggling' to include not only illegal import and export, but also illegal distilling and were mainly concerned with the coastal aspect of free-trade. This is a period noted in history for the active commerce of smugglers particularly benefiting from their trade in the primary towns and cities where there was an established market for costly foreign luxuries.

Smugglers concentrated on the transport and supply of heavily taxed staple goods. Of note this included silks, salt, tea and tobacco. Much of it was commonly transferred by horseback from the various remote landing points along the Fife and East Lothian coastline, peppered with remote coves hidden from the prying eyes of Excise Officers.

It could be claimed Scottish smuggling was a consequence of the 1707 Act of Union as prior to this there was a significant difference between the duties imposed north and south of the border. The Scottish, always with an eye towards opportunity, took to smuggling highly-taxed goods into England however when the countries became unified the duty imposed on many key products in Scotland rose by up to 70 percent, killing off such trade. These taxes were viewed as repressive and any act of defiance by default became an act of patriotism.

Against this backdrop is set the tale of Major Weirs Coach, drawing on many established historical facts.

Major Thomas Weir (1599 - 1670) is recorded as being the last man known to be executed in Scotland for the practice of witchcraft and devil worship. He became known as the 'Wizard of West Bow', the area of Edinburgh in which he kept a house. Before his unmasking as an occultist he had enjoyed an excellent career in the military, attaining the post of Commander of the Edinburgh Town Guard in 1650, thereby reaching the rank of Major. As a renowned Covenanter he had an established reputation for being an orthodox Presbyterian. The area around Bowhead was notorious for the density of Presbyterian residents, earning them the nickname of the 'Bowhead Saints'. To the casual observer he would appear to have led a quiet and pious existence.

Weir came from aristocratic lineage. His father was Laird of Kirkton and his mother, purported to have the power of clairvoyance, was Lady Jean Somerville. An imposing man, the Major was often seen to parade through the town carrying a walking stick allegedly made of black Thornwood, which has an ancient connection to witchcraft. Associated with the Waning and Dark Moon it is known as a keeper of dark secrets, is linked with wars, wounds and death, and is sacred to the Scottish Crone Cailleach - the Divine Hag.

During 1670, in his seventieth year, he was stricken by a strange affliction during a prayer meeting and began confessing to a catalogue of crimes. His confessions included an on-ongoing incestuous relationship with his sister, Jean, which had begun when she was aged 10 and with whom he shared his house. He went on to admit to litany of immoral conduct including all types of sexual depravity, and acts of bestiality.

Brother and sister were taken for interrogation, whereupon Jean confirmed the nature of their relationship and expanded upon their history of witchcraft and debauchery. Jean told of how her brother had met with the Devil himself several years previously who summoned a flaming carriage and horses to whisk him away on some dark errand. Upon his return he had gained "supernatural intelligence" and carried the black Thornwood walking stick, for which he became notorious. When interrogated separately from her brother she told of how they would frequently roam the surrounding areas in a fiery coach, travelling as far as Musselburgh and Dalkeith to do their demonic work. Jean maintained the walking stick was the source of his occult power, claiming it could run errands for its master.

Initially their confessions were given no credence however after a short time in the Edinburgh Tolbooth, and a subsequent cross examination by the Minister of Ormiston, Major Weir and Jean were sent for trial on the 9th April 1670, convicted and executed by hanging where the city boundary bordered Leith, near where Pilrig street sits today. Weirs body was put to fire together with his Thornwood staff, both taking an excessive amount of time to burn with some witnesses claiming they saw the staff twisting with a life of its own.

In the decades which followed people would speak of seeing strange lights in the windows of his empty house accompanied by unearthly noises and phantasms, or of hearing his coach and horses thundering down Cowgate. Others of witnessing his apparition stalking the streets near West Bow and report sightings of his Thornwood staff floating alone, in search of its master.

None dared to live in the house on West Bow after his death, leaving it empty for over 100 years. Eventually it was partially demolished in the 1860's and incorporated into what is now an Italian gothic chapel, used as a Quaker Meeting House, located on Victoria Terrace.

It remains one of the most purportedly haunted places in the Edinburgh.

The sub plot of Wattie Brown is also anchored in the historical event known as the Porteous Riots of 1736.

In the January of that year three men, Andrew Wilson, William Hall and George Robertson, were tried for the acts of smuggling and attempting to rob the Collector of Excise, at the Pittenweem Inn, Fife. Their trial, widely regarded as a pretence, saw the three quickly despatched to the ill-reputed Tolbooth Prison.

In return for turning evidence against his two collaborators Hall had his sentence revoked while Wilson and Robertson faced execution at the Grassmarket gallows on the 14 April.

The pair set about plotting their escape from the Tolbooth, contriving to saw through the bars of their narrow window. Using a rope Robertson slipped through first and ably managed his descent into the street below, where he waited on Wilson. His friend however was of a more heavy-set build and became constrained in the gap. Alerted to their attempted breakout the guards promptly detained them both once again.

During their pre-execution service, a customary practice for anyone sentenced to the gallows, the lithe Robertson managed to make a second successful dash for freedom. Rumour eventually placed him in the Netherlands where it is alleged, he remained for the rest of his life as a tavern landlord.

As a popular smuggler, and local hero, the hanging of Wilson on the 14 April inevitably drew a large crowd. The despised Captain of the Guard, John Porteous, had responsibility for overseeing the proceedings of the day and at first all was clam. Only when Wilsons body was being removed from the gallows did the unrest begin. Motivated by reports Wilson had been tortured during his internment anger swept through the crowd. They began throwing abuse, mud and stones at the executioner and accompanying City Guard. Panicked by such mob antagonism Porteous, who had reportedly been drinking heavily beforehand, gave orders to fire into the masses.

By the time the crowd disbursed, and the body count complete, a total of eleven injured and nine deaths were confirmed. One was a young boy who had been watching events from a nearby tenement window. (Widow Horner's brother?)

Porteous was duly arrested and tried for murder. A man of overweening ego he was universally derided. A willing cohort of witnesses prepared to testify against him was easily assembled. His trial proved short with the jury quickly arriving at a guilty verdict, with his hanging scheduled for the 8 September.

News of the verdict passed swiftly to London and the Prime Minister of the day, Sir Robert Walpole. The prosecution and sentence of such a notable government official was largely unprecedented. Porteous actions were viewed by London as having been justifiably taken and so Walpole set about securing a Royal Pardon.

By the 7th September rumour of the Royal Pardon was rife and amid a citywide wide lock-down a horde, alleged to number some 4000, flooded the streets around the Tolbooth where Porteous was known

to be incarcerated. They targeted the prison doors, setting them ablaze. Eventually Porteous was captured, dragged from the prison to the Grassmarket and hung from a Dyer's pole using rope procured from a drapers' shop. The owner of the shop later found money left upon the counter to pay for the rope and any damage to the premises.

Although many high-profile citizens were implicated in what came to be regarded as a righteous murder, and despite a published £200 reward for information relating to the lynching of Captain Porteous and those responsible, no arrests or prosecutions were ever made.

The site of Porteous lynching can still be found, marked by a plaque at the Grassmarket.

Deacon Dickson and his entourage were vehemently opposed to the developments proposed by George Drummond (1688 - 1766), who was the Grand Master Mason of the Grand Lodge of Scotland from 1752 and who served as the Lord Provost of Edinburgh on a number of occasions between 1725 and 1764.

It was Drummonds vision to establish a New Town to the north of the existing city. In 1759 he commenced the draining of the North Loch and laid the foundation stone of a new North Bridge in 1763. His ambition was to alleviate the unhealthy conditions and overcrowding of the Old Town and in 1766 he successfully convinced the City Council to support his grand extensions to the north.

His contributions and legacy can be found all over Edinburgh: The Royal Infirmary, widely renowned as one of the worlds foremost teaching hospitals, established in 1729 from funds raised by Drummond; In 1753 he laid the foundation stone of the Royal Exchange on the Royal Mile, currently used as the City Chambers. Several places around the city also carry his name, such as Drummond Gardens and Drummond Place. He died in 1766 and was laid to rest at Canongate Churchyard.

In conversation between Kerr and Widow Horner we learn of 'Bloody Mackenzie'. Not enough to have the streets of Edinburgh haunted by a rampaging, flaming coach under the command of a dark necromancer the city is also home to the poltergeist of Sir George 'Bloody' Mackenzie.

In life he was a formidable Scottish solicitor and founder of the Advocates' Library in Scotland, now the National Library. He became best known for his brutal treatment of the Presbyterian Covenanters in 1679. Charged with enforcing the laws of Charles II Mackenzie looked to bring the Covenanters to heel. Following the Covenanters defeat at the Battle of Bothwell Bridge he had 1200 prisoners confined in a field adjacent to Greyfriars Kirkyard where they were subject to abuse, starvation and slaughter. He was known to be an advocate of the use of torture, proud of the fact it was legal in Scotland. During his lifetime Mackenzie is estimated to have been responsible for the deaths of approximately 18000 Covenanters.

After his death in 1691 his remains were interred in a mausoleum in Greyfriars Kirkyard where he became a supernatural phenomenon. Frustrated by the fact his body was placed next to the Covenanters prison it is claimed his coffin moves about on its own, with his wraith driven to torment visitors to Greyfriars by scratching at the unwary.

The tomb is a landmark stop on 'Ghost Tours of Edinburgh' with over 450 incidents of paranormal activity and attacks being recorded since the Council approved it for Controlled Tours. Brave visitors are invited to peer in through the windows of the Black Mausoleum whilst saying aloud:

"Bluidy Mackenzie, come oot if ye daur, lift the sneck and draw the bar."

Tread carefully the streets of 'Auld Reekie!'

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