

Issue No 17
Summer 2013

Editor:
Martin Gostwick,
Secretary

Hugh's News

Newsletter of
The Friends of Hugh Miller



Cromarty Primary pupils enjoy our fossil-handling opportunities

IS GEOLOGY FOR SCHOOLS ON THE ROCKS?

LEADING earth scientists and teachers are urging Scottish educational authorities to reverse “ill-informed and misguided” plans to drop geology Highers as a distinct subject from 2015, according to a report in the Sunday Herald (03/03/13).

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)’s head of Curriculum for Excellence development, Roderic Gillespie, is quoted as follows: “In the context of the new national qualifications, geology is considered to be a very much a cross-curricular subject and, as such, aspects of geology are included in the new chemistry, physics, geography, science and environmental science courses.”

The Sunday Herald report states the number of schools offering geology Highers has dropped sharply from about 40 in the past to a handful today. Pupil take up dropped from 63 in 2011 to 17 in 2012. From personal knowledge, only one academy round the Cromarty Firth, Alness, is still providing geology classes.

The Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) chief executive Mike Robinson, called on Scottish education secretary Mike Russell to reconsider dropping geology - a science that was founded in Scotland. He said: “We are determined not to see this subject disappear from our schools, or be sliced and diced until there’s nothing left.”

Scottish geologist and well-known TV presenter, Professor Iain Stewart, commented:

“It is truly perverse that a nation with an economy fuelled by offshore oil and gas reserves revealed by geologists, and that draws tourists to an intricate but majestic rocky landscape unravelled by geologists, is dropping that very subject from its advanced school curriculum.”

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He added: “Geologists are fond of pointing out that in terms of the raw materials for the modern world, ‘the rocks provide’. But that is, of course, only if there are geologists trained to discover them.”



Professor Iain Stewart



A future geology student?

Perth High School geology students prompted the calling of the conference, entitled Scotland Rocks. Teacher Rachel Hay pointed out Scotland's "world-class geodiversity and longstanding reputation for geological research," as well as offering geology jobs commanding high salaries. S6 pupil Sean Rofe said : "Geology helps you understand the world and country we live in." His classmate Joe Purves said people were focussed on discovering life beyond earth , "but we need to discover what's closer to home, and understand how it came to be like it is."

In subsequent correspondence in the same paper, Dr Robert Trythall of Banchory said the Aberdeen oil and gas industry currently faced a shortage of geologists, which "can only get worse" if ceased to be a subject in its own right.

We decided to approach the oil company TOTAL in Aberdeen for comment. Between 2007 and 2011, Total held an annual Geoscience Day for Cromarty Firth academies, Tain, Invergordon, Alness, Dingwall and Fortrose, each of which were attended by 50 pupils from S6 and S7 classes. These days were held at the Cromarty Centre (Old Brewery) and included a visit to the Miller Museum. They were designed to encourage students to consider a career in geology.

TOTAL communication adviser Sandra McIntosh told Hugh's News: "We are of course very surprised and disappointed to learn that the new Curriculum will not include geology as a separate subject. This was discussed at an education summit that I attended in Aberdeen recently and as you can imagine was a hot topic.

"As you will appreciate, TOTAL recruits from not only the UK but from an international pool of candidates for many different roles, not just those in the geology / geophysicist professions. It is too soon to predict how this decision will affect businesses like TOTAL in the long term, however we will continue to speak positively about geology during our presentations and school talks and emphasise how important it (geology) is to the research and development of our operations."

Do our members have views on this, and should we as an organisation express what we think to the Scottish education authorities? If you do, please write to us, or bring your views to our AGM.



Hands-on fossil worktable in Miller House



An engraving from The Old Red Sandstone

IMPORTANT REMINDER



Cromarty Centre (The Old Brewery)

PLEASE MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO ATTEND OUR 7th AGM on SATURDAY 18TH MAY 2013 at the CROMARTY CENTRE (Old Brewery), Burnside Place, Cromarty, between 2.00 and 5.00pm.

It will be immediately followed by a PUBLIC MEETING, starting between 3.00 and 3.30pm, which will be given an illustrated presentation, on:

“Highland history’s riches and where to find them” by Norman Newton

(former head of Highland Council Libraries’ reference and information services).

Light refreshments will be served.

PROVISIONAL AGENDA

1. Chairman Nigel Trewin’s opening remarks
2. Minutes of 6th annual meeting and matters arising
3. Secretary’s report for 2012/13
4. Treasurer’s annual report
5. Election of Office Bearers and Management Committee
6. Property Manager Dr Alix Powers-Jones’s report
7. Qs & As, contributions and discussion from the floor



Norman Newton

Members should note we have passed another momentous year of development and expansion of facilities, amenities and acquisitions at the Museum, many of them arising from the partnership with the Friends, and which will be well worth hearing about and discussing. There will be an announcement of a major new donation during Item 7. And Mr Newton’s talk will give invaluable hints on how and where to go about your own research work. He is a board member of our partners the Groam House Museum at Rosemarkie.

NB: This is an important opportunity for members paying by cash to bring along their subscriptions, also for donations to be given.

NEWS

ANOTHER GOOD DONOR FOR NEW GARDEN



Our secretary presents Dr Alix Powers-Jones with a handsome Friends cheque

Highland Members Centre of the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) has parted with a handsome gift of £250 toward the Museum's new gardening space, whose development has proceeded apace since the last issue.

This gift followed the presentation of a cheque for £1,785 from The Friends of Hugh Miller, and a £200 donation from our member, the Rev Ken Dupar.

The latest gift came in response to a talk at Inshes Church, Inverness in February by property manager Dr Alix Powers-Jones, on the theme: "Hugh Miller: Divining the past: Challenging the Future."

She was taken by surprise when, asked if there was anything the Museum needed, she said it could do with £50 toward a table for the space, only to be told: "Oh we think we can do better than that."

The "better" was the £250, PLUS another £250 toward the development of life-long learning at the property, a key part of Dr Alix's ambitions for the future. The new space is an important additional amenity for this purpose, given the very confined conditions in the two buildings.

Calum Anton, the landscape architect who designed both Miller's Yard: Garden of Wonders behind Miller House, and Lydia Garden at the rear of the Cottage, contributed a lay-out, and the Trust's contractor stonemason Donnie Mackenzie built the low sandstone walls and seating.

A team of seven NTS Highland conservation volunteers led by countryside ranger Rob Dewar subsequently performed the "amazing feat" in Dr Alix's words of shifting over two and a half tonnes of Spey chip from street to site, relaying them through in large trugs. Access restriction prevented a hydraulic lift. They laid the fine-coloured chip on top of a membrane, and moved a very large rose from a hazardous fence location to a safer one. All this in the space of two days. "I cannot believe how hard they worked," said Dr Alix.

Further sessions are planned in the summer for installing tubs, a new fence, and clematises, with a provisional target of opening in midsummer.



Spey chip square



Pine corner rockery

SCOTTISH FOSSILS

Nigel H Trewin

Dunedin Academic Press

The book provides a virtual museum gallery of over 100 Scottish fossils. The chosen specimens represent a range from bacteria to fish and dinosaurs, and all are illustrated in colour. Many of the specimens are important to the history of geology in Scotland, or superbly preserved specimens such as fossil fish from the Old Red Sandstone. The specimens are held in museum, university and private collections, and only a few are on public display. Several specimens from the Hugh Miller Collection in National Museums Scotland are included, as are examples of the fossil fish studied by Hugh Miller and featured in his geological writings.

List Price £30.

Special Author Offer of £20 for one copy to members of The Friends of Hugh Miller attending the AGM in May!

EASTER EGGFEST

Our Museum took part for the first time in the NTS Easter Egg trail which the Trust runs annually with eggs donated by Cadbury's – one of 45 properties to do so.

Staff reported a real boost to the start of the season, with some 112 trail quizzes completed by children, usually with parental – and staff – assistance over Easter Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

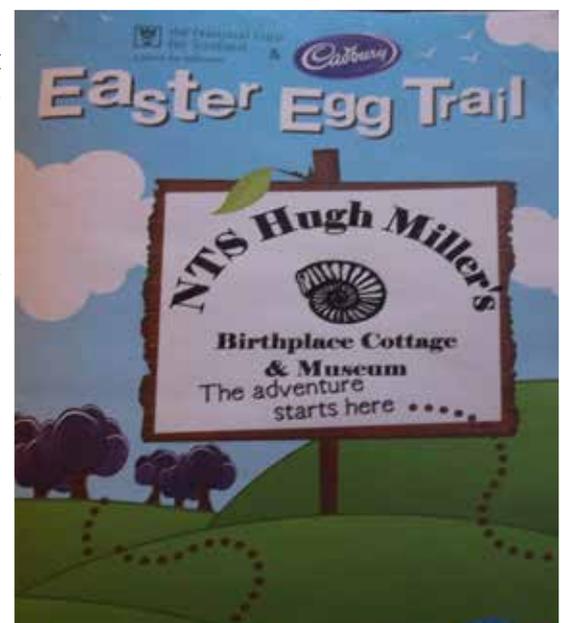
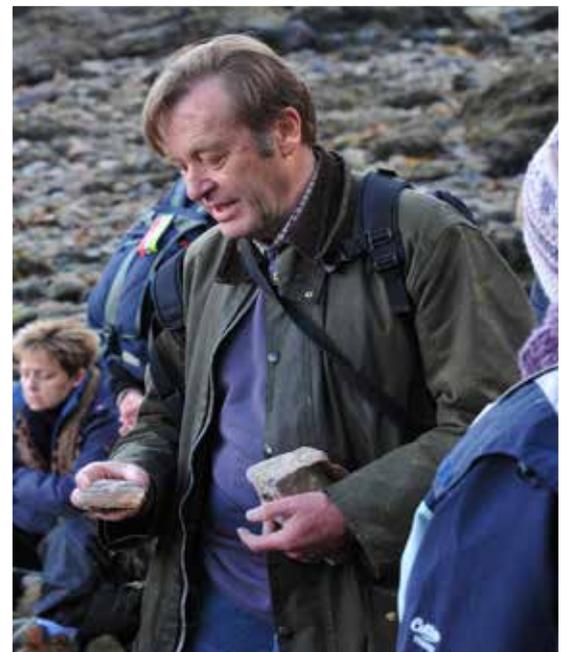
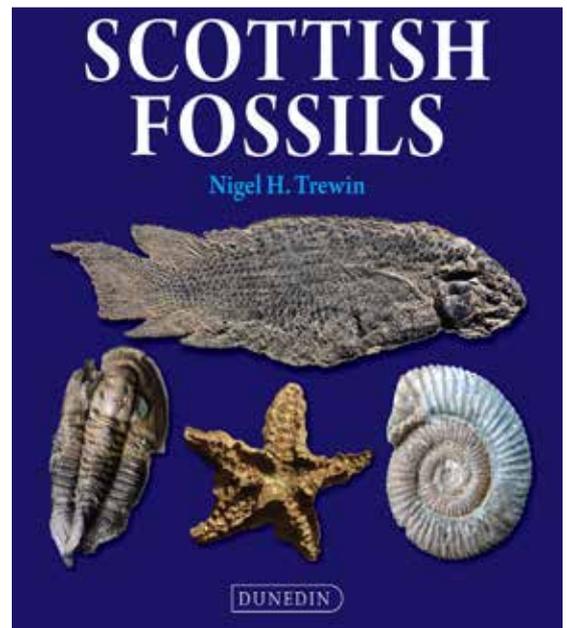
The questions composed by Dr Powers-Jones were designed to "give the children an idea of what it was like to live without heating, lighting, refrigeration or running water in a Cottage over 300 years old.

Attendance figures were not yet completed when Hugh's News went to press, but the total footfall over the Easter weekend has almost certainly exceeded 300, a figure not seen since the early 1990s.

Illustrations

Top right: Nigel Trewin's new book

Middle right: The man himself



FROM THE ARCHIVES – No 2

“Nebuchadnezzar’s Furnace”

This is Robert Dick’s metaphor for a hot sun in Caithness, from his letter fragments. For those unfamiliar with the Old Testament, Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian king who threatened to burn anyone to death who refused to worship at a statue of his god (Daniel:3).

Jane Verburg

SOME fascinating new insights into Robert Dick’s life, character, and vivid writing style have been cast up by examining three fragile letter fragments gifted by Mr Bob Davidson to the Hugh Miller Museum in 2008.



Robert Dick

Each letter has been torn and the stamps have been cut out. They appear like disjointed jigsaw puzzle pieces. At least one of these letters was in the hands of Samuel Smiles (Dick’s biographer, 1878) and sometime later all three were certainly in the hands of an over-enthusiastic philatelist.

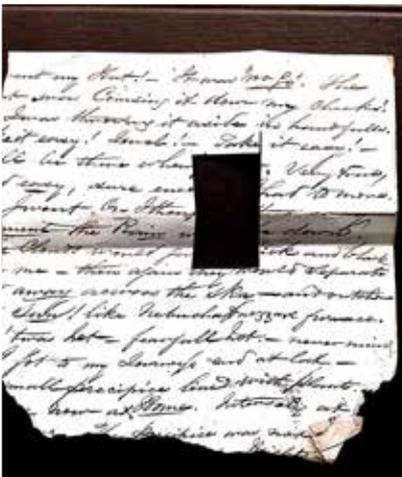
Robert Dick (1811 – 1866) - baker, geologist and botanist from Thurso - corresponded with Miller from 1844 until Miller’s death. Dick sent fossils to Miller and engaged with the geological issues of the time. Miller even stayed with Dick and acknowledged the contribution that Dick made to his understanding of fossil fish.

Fragment July 1863:

We have the top right-hand corner of this letter. There is a tear along the left and bottom and the stamp has been cut out, so that a blank hole exists in the middle of the writing. It was most probably written to a Mr Thomas Mitchell, of Market Street, Haddington and describes one of Dick’s botanical explorations to a precipice in extreme weather conditions: *The [rain] was coursing it down my cheeks! I was throwing it aside in handfulls.* Although we literally need to read between the lines (or around the damage), the flavour of Dick’s passionate writing is unquestionable. He goes on to say that the sun comes out and burns like *Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace*.



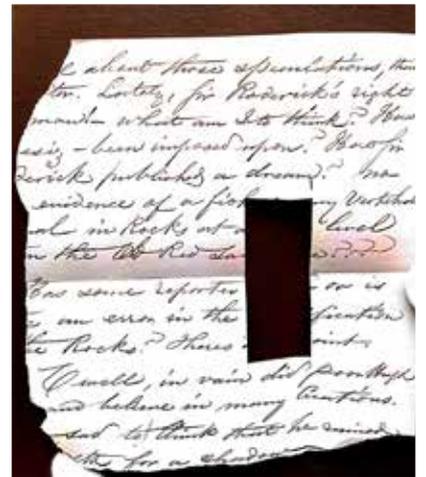
Jane Verburg dressed up in top hat to bring Dick the eccentric genius to life for a packed audience of Cromarty History Society members.



Robert “washed rain off his face in handfulls”

In the biography Smiles quotes a number of letters written by Dick that have a similar feel to the descriptions in this letter. Dick wrote with great gusto about his travels on foot in order to locate new specimens for his herbarium. There are accounts of him walking up to 60 miles in a day having already worked in his bake house.

At the end of this letter Dick refers to himself as *getting better* and signs off, *Yours truly Robert*. Dick lost a large consignment of uninsured flour in March 1863 (the ship delivering it sank in Aberdeen



What was Hugh Miller’s shadow?

harbour). He suffered financially, so much so, that he had to sell his personal fossil collection in April of that year. This reference to *getting better* may allude to his physical health or possibly to the fact that he attempted to rebuild his life after this devastating incident from which, in reality, he never truly recovered.

Fragment August 8th 1863:

This letter was written to Mr Alexander Falconer, Court Street, Haddington. We have only the bottom right-hand corner of this document and again the stamp has been cut out. Dick's sister, Jane, married Alexander Falconer on 27 July 1863 (just twelve days before this letter was written). It appears to make mention of Jane (*she*) and is perhaps Dick's way of introducing himself to his new brother-in-law. Tragically, Jane died in February 1864. Dick struggled to re-find an inner strength after this point in his life – the loss of his flour placed him in great debt; the selling of his fossil collection left him depressed and the death of his sister left him lonely and soulless.

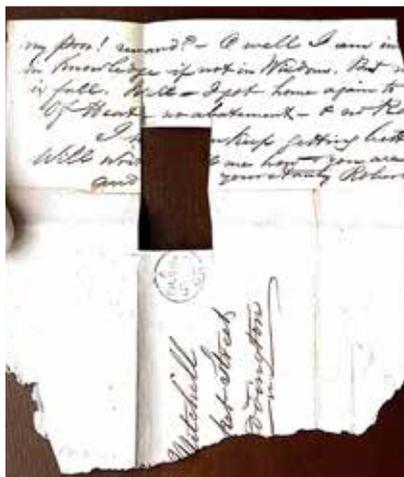


Jane studies the letters

Fragment December 2? 1863:

We have the top right-hand corner of this letter with a tear along the left and bottom; a dark hole where the stamp once was means that the flow of the writing is lost. This letter was written to either his sister, Jane, or to her husband, Alexander Falconer. This is a particularly tantalising letter as it mentions a number of significant geologists of the day – Sir Roderick Murchison, Louis Agassiz and Hugh Miller. This letter is quoted by Smiles and in it Dick refers to a recent article in an Edinburgh paper by John Salter (palaeontologist), the contents of which have irritated him – he was a man with strong opinions. He goes on to say, *Well, in vain did poor Hugh toil, and believe in many creations. How sad to think that he ruined his health for a shadow.* This thought-provoking statement unfortunately provides little clarity about Dick's opinion of Miller's life, work and death although it forces us to ponder. We shall perhaps never know whether or not *toil* refers to Miller's hard work at 'The Witness' or to something else. There is evidence that Miller believed in a Succession of Creations and this is mentioned here by Dick. But that *shadow* has – through time – become another shadow which seems impossible to unravel. If only Dick had been less metaphorical and more literal. I think, for now, the *shadow* shall remain exactly that - something we cannot pin down.

Research on these fragments is on-going.



Letter to Thomas Mitchell

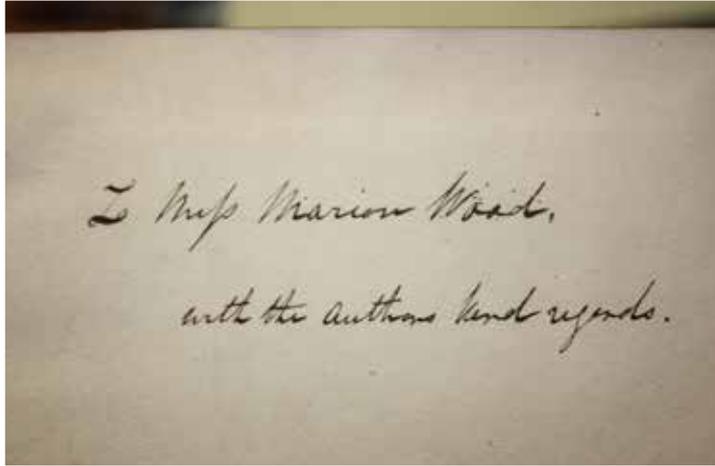
Bibliography:

Smiles, S. (1878) *Robert Dick, Baker of Thurso, Geologist and Botanist.*

London: John Murray



Jane also offered "parlies" to the Cromarty History Society fans in honour of the Thurso baker.



INTRIGUING DEDICATIONS IN BOOKS BY HUGH MILLER

Nigel Trewin

In Hugh's News 16 (2013) I gave brief account of my auction purchase of Hugh Miller association material from the Riddell Library. Here I expand on the theme of dedications in Miller volumes.

Dedications written on the flyleaf of a book can reveal a variety of interesting information, and can

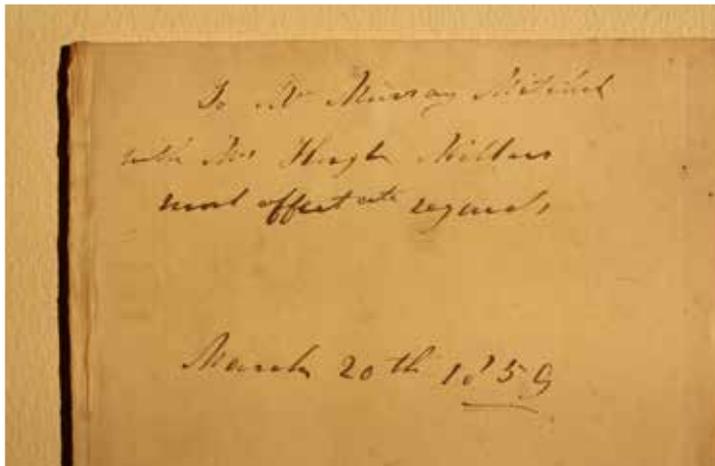
prove direct links between the author and the recipient. Books with dedications from the author are termed 'Association Volumes', and are sought after by collectors for their historical interest.

In the case of Hugh Miller there are three types of 'association' that can be recognised. These can be summarised as direct from Hugh Miller (pre 1857), direct from Lydia Miller (from 1857), and from the Publisher. The first, and most sought after, is a dedication in Hugh Miller's own hand to a known recipient. The example illustrated is in a copy of *'My Schools and Schoolmasters'* (1854), and whilst Hugh did not sign his name, it is clearly in his handwriting. The recipient, Miss Marion Wood, was a friend of the Miller family, and attended geology classes that Hugh Miller gave for ladies. Her personal recollections of Hugh Miller are reproduced as *'Recollections of a Lady'* in Bayne's *'Life and Letters of Hugh Miller'* (Vol 2. p. 344-354).

It seems to have been the general fashion at the time to give a dedication 'from the author' rather than to give an autograph. A problem arises in that authors frequently instructed publishers to send out complimentary copies of books, and these were inscribed by the publisher rather than being in the hand of the author. Hence without handwriting evidence, it is dangerous to assume that any 'from the author' dedication was actually written by the author.

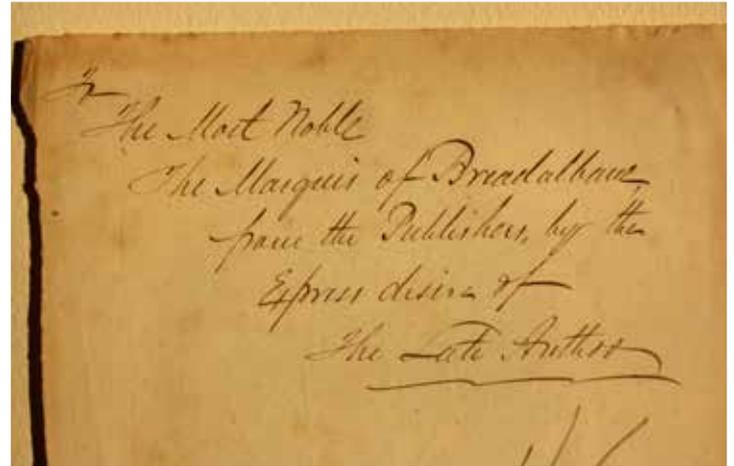
Hugh Miller sent out numerous copies of books in his lifetime, many recorded in his letters. Thus we know that he ordered copies of books from the publisher so that he could send them to Robert Dick in Wick. He sent *'Footprints'* to Prof Owen; *'First Impressions'* to Roderick Murchison, and he would surely have sent books to Agassiz.

He sent *'Schools and Schoolmasters'* to Robert Chalmers and Thomas Carlyle, and there must have been many more on his list, covering geology, literature and religion.



Following Hugh Miller's untimely death in 1856, Lydia Miller saw that Hugh's works continued to be published. In this she had help from Prof. Fleming for *'Testimony of the Rocks'* (1857), and the Rev. W. S. Symonds for *'Cruise of the Betsey'* (1858) and *'Sketch Book of Popular Geology'* (1859). Both Lydia and the publisher sent out complimentary copies of these books. The Friends recently purchased a copy of *'Cruise of the Betsey'* with a dedication by Lydia Miller to Lady Kinnaird (Hugh's News 14, 2012). A similar dedication 'to Mr Murray Mitchel with Mrs Hugh Millers most affection-

ate regards', and dated March 20th 1859 is illustrated, it is in Lydia's hand on a detached flyleaf from 'Sketch Book'. Murray Mitchell was a missionary in India, but was in Scotland in 1857-9. Murray Mitchell's wife Maria Hay Mackenzie Mitchell was the daughter of Alexander Flyter, minister at Alness from 1820 to 1843, whom Hugh describes as "an old friend," in *'Rambles of a Geologist'*, (p353). Flyter's wife was Elizabeth Bayne, related to Miller's biographer. Lydia is known to have stayed with the Flyters, about 1835, not long before her marriage to Hugh. Lydia appears to have spelt Mitchell with only one 'l', but this seems the probable link.



Two slightly different dedications in copies of *'Testimony of the Rocks'* are written by the publisher. One 'to the Most Noble The Marquis of Breadalbane, from the Publisher, by the express desire of the Late Author' implies that Hugh Miller had left a list of people to be sent copies of *'Testimony'* before he died. Lord Breadalbane offered Hugh Miller a post as 'Distributor of Stamps and Collector of the Property Tax for Perthshire', It was a relatively easy post and would have paid about £800 per annum. He declined the post, not wanting to change career, and also probably reluctant to move to Perth.

Another publisher dedication in *'Testimony'* is in the same hand and to 'Miss Marion Wood, from the Publisher by Mrs Hugh Miller's desire'. It is maybe curious that Marion Wood did not have a copy direct from Lydia rather than the publisher; maybe Marion Wood's friendship was more with Hugh than Lydia. Her recollections of him referred to above were certainly of the warmest and most admiring character.

Another dedication (noted for sale from a book dealer in South Africa) is in the same format but to Prof George Wilson. He was Professor of Technology at Edinburgh University, and first director of 'The Industrial Museum of Scotland'. Letters of thanks and condolence sent to Lydia in April 1857 reveal that copies, presumably of *'Testimony of the Rocks'* were sent to Charles Dickens, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle amongst others.

It is probable that some of these volumes dedicated to the great and the good of the time survive unrecognised in institutional and private libraries to this day. However, such volumes rarely seem to come on to the market. I would be interested to hear of any association copies of Miller's books known to readers, so that the information (or even the book!) can be added to the Miller Museum archive.

My thanks to Mike Taylor and Martin Gostwick for contributing information for this article.

Illustrations

Top left:

Miller's own dedication to Edinburgh admirer Marion Wood.

Bottom left:

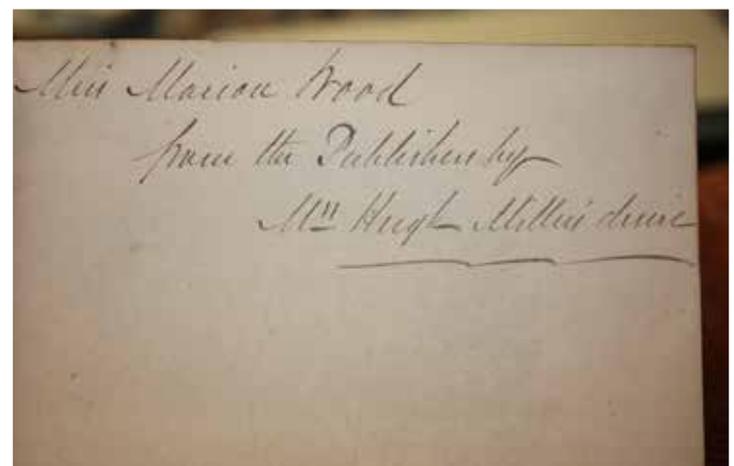
Lydia Miller wrote this dedication to old family friend Mrs Murray Mitchell.

Top right:

A publisher's dedication to the Marquis of Breadalbane

Bottom right:

Another book for Marion Wood, sent on behalf of Lydia



LANDMARK SERIES - No 5

Martin Gostwick

MULTIFORM WONDERS



THERE is only one word to describe the “Natural World” displays in the “new” Royal Scottish Museum, an often over-used word, but in this case entirely valid: AWESOME.

It took Frieda Gostwick and I two visits stretching over several hours to comprehend the grandeur and spectacle spread round and up the five levels, as viewed from the magnificent wrought-iron bound galleries of the original Victorian edifice.

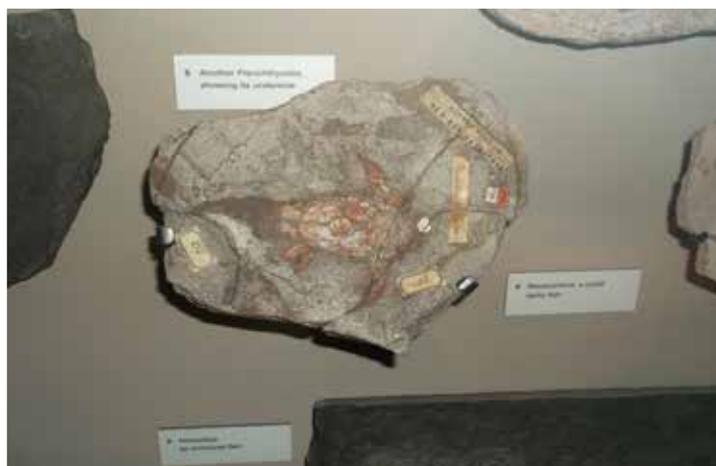
We were most kindly given a guided tour on our arrival by two old friends of the Hugh Miller Museum, Dr Stig Walsh, senior curator, vertebrate palaeontology, and Dr Sarah Stewart, assistant curator, invertebrate paleontology. They were among the NMS team who helped set up Miller House and its subsequent museum registration.



They introduced us to a cast of *Tyrannosaurus rex's* skeleton, the 12-metre long Jurassic beast with the terrifying skull, and nearby, a swooping great white shark, maw stretched as if to engulf us whole on the spot. Life-size models, or stuffed specimens of most of the planet's other great animals are just as prominent, if less scary. Here, as just one example, was the 200-ton blue whale, whose tongue alone is as heavy as a whole African elephant.

Cinema-sized screens suspended at various levels brought scenes from the world's great mountains, oceans, skies and outer space. The “restless earth” could be seen live in its paroxysms of earthquake, volcano and tsunami.

Equally spectacular was the astrolabe, made over a thousand years ago in Cordoba to measure time and direction from the stars, and the huge amethyst geode from Brazil, all of 130 million years old.



TO BEHOLD

A great many "inter-active" facilities are available for the young audience. Near the blue whale we found weighing scales, which enabled me to establish I am as heavy as a komodo dragon, while Frieda compared with a harbour porpoise.

If there was a gap in interpretation, it was the almost complete absence of references to the humans who once discovered and collected and described all these fabulous natural phenomena.

We also checked out the stupendous "Beginnings" geological exhibition in the basement of the National Museum next door on Lothian Road, happily marvelling once more at its passages through deep time, not seen since a first visit in the 1990s.

We continued on the Hugh Miller trail to the also renewed Scottish National Portrait Gallery, hoping to see some of Hill and Adamson's original calotypes for the first time, but were disappointed, because the relevant gallery was closed at the time.

However, we did salute Miller's marble bust in the Great Hall, made by William Brodie in 1857. Hugh occupies a central berth, just behind Robbie Burns, beneath the Royal Arms of Scotland in stained glass - and beside his old friend, photographer and painter David Octavius Hill.

Illustrations

- Top left:** *Cetaceans as if in flight*
Upper left: *Looking down to elephant and giraffe*
Bottom left: *Possibly the biggest scrimshaw ever found*
Middle left: *Miller's very own discovery, labelled in its original spelling of Pterichthys, amid much evidence of repeated cataloguing*
Middle right: *Banded ironstone, over 2.5 billion years old*
Bottom right: *Frieda Gostwick admires the bust of Miller in the Grand Hall of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery*
Upper right: *One of the best preserved and finest Pictish slabs in the nation*
Top right: *T Rex, and Great White Shark*



PROGRESS MADE ON STATUE CAPTION CHANGE

WE have received a positive response from NMS to our representations about a misleading caption interpreting Hugh Miller's death, placed under his statue in the Museum's sculpture gallery.

The troubling sentence read that "Miller failed to reconcile his religious faith with his scientific discoveries and committed suicide."

This was first brought to our notice by former Friends' patron Dr Lester Borley, and Frieda and I visited the Museum partly to check this out, as well as view the wonderful new exhibitions.

In subsequent correspondence with NMS, we pointed out that there was no basis on the known evidence for this assertion, and asked that the wording be reconsidered, along the following lines: "Hugh

Miller (1802-1856), the Cromarty-born pioneer geologist. The Royal Scottish Museum (NMS) holds the national collection of his fossils. They were purchased by subscription for the nation from his family following his death. He committed suicide at the age of 54, the causes for which have never been clearly established, but which were probably the result of a brain tumour, and fear of impending madness."

It will of course be for the Museum to decide on its own preferred revised wording, but we will be content if it adheres to established facts.

The white marble statue of Hugh Miller gravely contemplating one of his fossils, carved by sculptress Amelia Paton in 1869, is of course a magnificent work. A well-loved feature of the "old" museum, it now enjoys pride of place among other figures in the new Sculpture Gallery.

On April 10, we received an email from Ms Catherine Gordon, displays manager in the NMS exhibitions and designs department, setting out the background and undertaking to seek a new label's inclusion in this year's programme of work. The text in full of her reply follows:

"Unfortunately we have quite a long list of spelling errors, typographical errors and in some cases inaccurate information in the galleries.

"In the final year running up to opening, our timescales were extremely tight, and the teams had to write and proof read under a great deal of pressure. They did very well in doing what they did so that we could be open on time and are understandably disappointed to let some things through the net. The list is not short however and correcting the errors will be costly due to the materials and printing methods used to stand up to the normal wear and tear in the permanent galleries.

"A decision was made last financial year that this particular list had to take lower priority than other snagging, defect and maintenance work. This is the start of a new financial year however and I am currently compiling an updated list of gallery related work which will feed into our budgetary planning. I will be discussing priorities with the Director of Public Programmes later this month/early May.

It would be my aim that lower priorities last year become higher this year and we can then programme this job in around the other packages of work.

"Many thanks for bringing this to our attention. It is only through feedback from visitors such as yourself that we are able, over a period of time, to improve the service we offer."

We have already thanked Ms Gordon for taking this matter further, and recognised at the same time the immense pressures NMS staff perpetually work under.



Amelia Paton's statue, with Dr Stig Walsh, Frieda Gostwick and Dr Sarah Stewart

LANDMARK SERIES - No 6

ENGLAND IN THE RAW

"*First Impressions of England and Its People*", Hugh Miller's riveting account of a tour of our southern neighbours in 1845, has been republished after an interval of nearly 30 years.

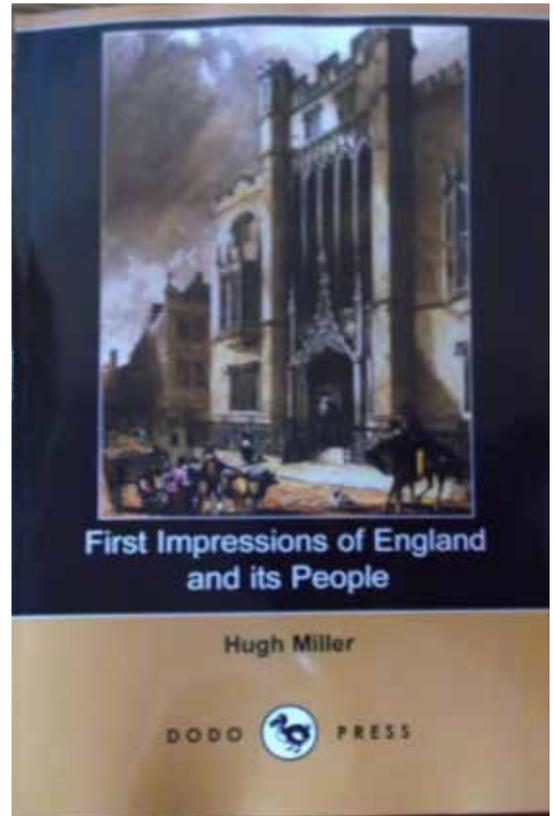
The welcome reappearance coincided with an excellent talk on the book by our member Dr Lindsay Hemy to a packed meeting of the Cromarty History Society last year.

Lindsay focussed especially on following in Miller's steps of pilgrimage to the home of his favourite poet, William Cowper, in the Buckinghamshire market town of Olney, and his later abode in the nearby village of Weston Underwood.

Cowper, now scarcely remembered, was one of the most celebrated poets of the 18th and 19th centuries, greatly admired by Jane Austen, Burns, Wordsworth and many others. His passionate love of nature spoke to Hugh Miller's own. He wrote odes to trees, kept pet hares in his house, and wrote a panegyric to domestic bliss called "The Task." Yet he was prone to crushing bouts of depression.

Lindsay described *First Impressions* as among Miller's most accessible books, encompassing his descriptions of York, Durham, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Stratford-upon-Avon, Birmingham, and London.

No gentleman tourist, despite his by then esteemed position as editor of *The Witness*, Miller recounted meetings with people of all classes on railway journeys, in horse-drawn coaches, at inns, in cheap London eating houses, and on his walks. He much disliked the railways, but he was a key eyewitness to this and other rapid change brought about by the Industrial Revolution, while simultaneously conducting geological field trips, notably in the Dudley coal measures and the Leasowes district of the West Midlands.



First Impressions book cover



Rev John Newton



Lindsay Hemy enthralled the Cromarty History Society with her talk on Miller's book



William Cowper, poet

Lindsay marvelled at his ability to walk long miles in the dark seeking a bed for the night. She spoke of how, on his way to Olney he encountered some very rough customers indeed, against whose possible assault, "I had luckily a brace of loaded pistols about me, and had at the moment a trigger under each fore-finger." He later met with spectators to a bareknuckle championship fistfight between Caunt of London, and challenger Abednego Thompson of Nottingham, which apparently went 93 rounds.

As she approached Olney, she felt she was "living across three centuries" seeing the tall parish church and hearing its pealing bells. The poet's red-brick house is now the



The Cowper Newton Museum

"great little" Cowper and Newton Museum, and Lindsay was able to identify the very same parlour, fossil collection and summerhouse Miller saw. The Rev John Newton, former slave-trader turned fervent abolitionist, who wrote the great salvation hymn *Amazing Grace*, was Cowper's neighbour and close friend.



The "Three Hares Gallery" in the Cowper and Newton Museum

The Museum, at Orchardside, Market Place, Olney, is open to the public from Tuesdays to Saturdays, from 10.30am to 4.30pm, 5th March – 23rd December. Its website is well worth a surf if you can't make it there.

An edition of Cowper's *Collected Poems* sits in the little bookcase in Hugh's writing room in the Birthplace Cottage, on a shelf of his other favourites installed by property manager Frieda Gostwick in the 1990s.

The volume includes his powerful last poem, *The Castaway*, in which he evoked a fate of eternal damnation. It was the poem Miller read to his children on the night he died. Lindsay concluded: "Both men died in despair, and neither deserved it."

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The summer house

EXTRACT FROM HUGH MILLER'S "FIRST IMPRESSIONS" ON COWPER'S HOUSE

"We see an old-fashioned home, considerably taller than the others, and differently tinted; for it is built of red brick, somewhat ornately bordered with stone. And this tall brick house was Cowper's home for nineteen years. It contains the parlour, which has become such a standard paragon of snugness and comfort that it will need no repairs at all in future; and the garden behind is that in which the poet reared his cucumbers and his Ribston pippins, and in which he plied hammer and saw to such excellent purpose, in converting his small greenhouse into a summer sitting-room, and in making lodging houses for his hares. He dated from that tall house not a few of the most graceful letters in the English language, and matured..." Truth," "Hope," "The Progress of Error," "Retirement," and "The Task."

I found the famed parlour vocal with the gabble of an infant school: carpet and curtains were gone, sofa and bubbling urn; and I saw, instead, but a few deal forms and about two dozen chubby children.... But at least one interesting feature had remained unchanged. There is a small porthole in the plaster, framed by a narrow facing of board; and through this porthole, cut in the partition for the express purpose, Cowper's hares used to come leaping out in their evening gambols on the carpet. I found the garden, like the house, much changed...the proprietors having now run a wall through the middle of it, one must now seek the pippin tree in one little detached bit of garden; and the lathe-and-plaster summer-house, which, when the weather was fine, used to form his writing-room in another....It is now seventy-nine years since the poet came to Olney. The little summer-house, maugre the fragility of its materials, is in a wonderfully good state of keeping. The old lath still retains the old lime; and all the square inches and finger-breadths of the plaster, inside and out, we find as thickly covered with names as the space in our ancient Scotch copies of the "Solemn League and Covenant." Cowper would have marvelled to have seen his little summer-house - for little it is - scarce larger than a four-posted bedstead - written, like the roll described in sacred vision, "within and without." We have seen from its window the back of honest John Newton's house, much enveloped in wood, with the spire of the church rising over; and on either side there are luxuriant orchards, in which the stiffer forms of the fruit-trees are relieved by lines of graceful poplars."

Miller concluded the passage with an anecdote redolent of his wry humour. He observed that:

"some of the names on the summer-house plaster are not particularly classical. One was that of a man who had subsequently been hung for murdering his mistress, and "some kind friend" of the deceased had later added "a minute figure on a gibbet, with the head rather uncomfortably twisted awry."

Graffiti down the centuries has not changed much!



MEMBERSHIP FORM

I WISH to become a member of the charity, The Friends of Hugh Miller (SC 037351), in order to support its work in making Miller's life and work better known, and in particular to assist in the development of the Hugh Miller Museum and Birthplace Cottage in Church Street, Cromarty.

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