

ALEXANDER OGSTOUN AND HIS FAMILY

STUDENTS OF SCOTTISH BOOKBINDINGS have long admired Alexander Ogstoun's signed decorative bindings, and were grateful to Mirjam Foot¹ for her reproduction of another one in *The Book Collector*, and her short account, from *printed* sources, of the bookbinder's career. Biographical information about seventeenth-century Scottish bookbinders is rarely ample, and data about Alexander Ogstoun, despite his eminence in the biblioepic art, is no exception to this rule. Searches in Scottish archives, however, and a fortunate interest by a Victorian Alexander Ogston² in the earlier history of his own family, have enabled the present writer to create the following short biographies of Alexander Ogstoun and his bookselling family. These biographies substantially augment the incomplete accounts in Plomer and Aldis and make a few additions to Ms. Foot's more recent work.³ As well as adding biographical information, the *vitae* given below add useful insights into some of the difficulties of Anglo-Scottish book-trade relations at the end of the seventeenth century.

OGSTOUN, Alexander, the elder. Bookbinder, bookseller and stationer, Edinburgh and elsewhere, 1675-1690.

The earliest *official* record of Alexander Ogstoun, senior, is that of his burghesship in the town of Edinburgh which was registered 18 February 1680.⁴ As three of his surviving decorative bindings can be dated 1675, 1678 and 1680 respectively, Ogstoun was obviously working at his craft before 1680. If he was working in Edinburgh, it must have been as a journeyman or as a non-freeman, and it is much more likely that he learnt and practised his craft elsewhere before he moved to Edinburgh. Ms. Foot correctly notes that Ogstoun was 'well commended by H.M. Advocate and many of the College of Justice, and likely to be useful to the good toun (Edinburgh).'⁵ The records of Edinburgh Town Council throw further light on why Edinburgh made Ogstoun a burghess, revealing that he was, almost certainly, from outside Edinburgh, and made burghess *gratis* because of his exceptional bookbinding skills. An extract, dated 13 February 1680, reads:

The Councill considering that the last Councill day they had apoynted Alexander Ogstoun bookbinder to be burghess and gild-brother for payment of ane hundred pounds to the dean of gild in satisfaction of the dewes. And that his Majesties Advocat and many of the College of Justice have recomended to the Councill *upon the accompt he is exceeding weill expert in his airt and is very usefull to them.* And the Councill considering he may be alsoe usefull to the good toun in his imployment, Therefore they declair albeit the said Dean of gild is charged with the said ane hundred pounds yet they heirby exeim and discharge him of the same.⁶

It should be noted that Ogstoun was not appointed burghess by right of his father, or by right of an Edinburgh wife (he was not yet married), and that the

fees he originally paid, and was later excused, are consistent with those paid by a 'stranger' to the city of Edinburgh. The Victorian Alexander Ogston believed that an Edinburgh branch of the Ogstoun family 'had probably come from Montrose' and that one James Ogstoun, wright in Edinburgh, was head of the family, and that James Ogstoun, writer in Edinburgh, and Alexander Ogstoun, bookseller in Edinburgh, 'had not improbably been his sons'. He provides no firm evidence for these assertions. The name Ogston or Ogstoun is found in earlier records over a wide area of Northeast Scotland. It is found, for example, in the records of the city of Aberdeen from the sixteenth century onwards. One George Ogstoun was burgess and bookbinder in Aberdeen from, at least, 1688 to 1696. There is no hard evidence to prove that George Ogstoun, bookbinder in Aberdeen, and Alexander Ogstoun, bookbinder in Edinburgh, were related, but it is hard not to believe that there was some connection between them.⁷

The Edinburgh marriage register records, under the date 16 April 1680, the marriage of Alexander Ogstoun, bookbinder, to Martha Stevenson.⁸ Martha Stevenson had at least four children, three sons named Hugh, Alexander and James, and a daughter also called Martha. An unnamed child of Alexander (H)owgstoun, bookbinder, who was buried in Henderson Tomb, Greyfriars Churchyard, 15 April 1687,⁹ was probably a fifth member of the family who died in infancy. Ms. Foot cautiously says that at least two of these children, Alexander and James, adopted their father's trade of bookseller. Documentary evidence, given below, indicates that all three male children became booksellers and stationers, and that the female child, Martha, was at least part-owner of the premises.

The few extant biographical details about Alexander senior suggest that he was a man of some leadership abilities, and possibly of superior education. The high esteem in which he was held by the law-lords of Scotland has already been mentioned, and it is significant that he was appointed ensign to the captain of the city militia on 16 February 1681.¹⁰ The names of some of the journeymen who worked for him have been recorded. One Gavin Dunbar, son of the deceased John Dunbar (of Orangefield?), was apprenticed to him on 14 August 1689, *qua* stationer.¹¹ A journeyman called John Reid, who seems to be a different man from the John Reid, *printer*, who flourished in Edinburgh from 1675 to 1712, worked as a shopman for Ogstoun. Reid was examined by the Privy Council in March 1685 on a charge of having taken part in 'tumults' in Edinburgh. His defence was that he was in Glasgow at the time.¹²

Ogstoun's original premises were on the north side of the High Street. An advertisement leaf at the end of G. Sinclair's *Satan's invisible world discovered* (Edinburgh, 1685) gives his address as 'Alexander Ogston's shop, stationer, at the foot of the Plainstones, at Edinburgh, on the North side of the street.'¹³ Sometime after this date, Ogstoun rented premises in the Parliament Close, the traditional centre of the Edinburgh book-trade, and it was from this address that he, his wife and family, conducted business for the next thirty years.

As Alexander Ogstoun was primarily a bookbinder and stationer his name does not often appear in the imprint of *Aldis* period books. Only six imprints have been noted carrying his name, all dating from the period 1685 to 1688. As Ms. Foot points out, Ogstoun's name appears in several deeds dated in the same period, documents that suggest that Ogstoun was a prosperous tradesman with some money to spare. On 4 April 1688, one Lewis Shaw, bookbinder in Edinburgh, was forced, from the comparative safety of Holyrood Abbey, a debtor's sanctuary, to make arrangements to repay with interest two Edinburgh lawyers who had lent him money to pay a debt incurred originally to Alexander Ogstoun.¹⁴

Two complicating factors in Ogstoun's career as a bookseller and bookbinder were the dangers of selling sectarian books in a period of religious strife, and the hostility of some Edinburgh printers and booksellers to other local tradesmen who wished to import stock from London. There is some evidence that the Scottish Privy Council, in the period of 1681 onwards, were anxious to encourage Scottish bookbinding. A proclamation dated 11 April 1681, 'for the encouragement of learning and manufacture of bookbinding', set a tariff on bound books 'warrantly imported for public sale' but exempted 'all books warrantly imported in sheets, not bound'.¹⁵ The merchants and stationers of Edinburgh protested to the Town Council on 19 December 1683 that the *cramers*, i.e. stallholders who were not burghesses, and who paid only a small rent for their stall, were buying books in sheets and 'employed bookbinders to bind the same'.¹⁶ Ogstoun's own business was definitely affected by restrictive trade practices. There is an extant letter in the Edinburgh Merchants Company archives from Thomas Mercer, bookseller in London, to Alexander Ogstoun, dated 11 July 1687, in which Mercer attempted to establish an Edinburgh connection and an Edinburgh market for pamphlets published in London.¹⁷ The letter reads:

Sr.

Upon the recommendation of a friend of yrs I have consign'd to you a small box of books which I desire you to dispose of as you find they will off, on my account, and if you can give me encouragement by this small experiment it's very probable I may give you farther trouble in affairs of this nature, their Envoices I have here enclosed whereby you will find I have charged them much lower than they have been sold for, but I refer it wholly to the prudence of yr management to advance on them as the nature of the thing will bear (wch upon tryal you will soon find) and for what charges you are at and for yr Commission, I shall most readily, and with a greatfull sense of yr Kindness, allow what is customary in yr [city] or otherwise to your own content, & if at any time, Dear Sir, I may be so happy as to be any way serviceable to you in these parts, be pleased with all freedom to command. Yr assured real friend and humble Servt. (tho' unknown to you)

Tho: Mercer

London, 11th July 1687. Bookseller near the Royal Exchange

1200 Dr. Tillotsons Sermons ¹⁸ before ye late King at 3d each	15. 0. 0.
600 Discourses agt Transubstantion ¹⁹ by ye same Author, tho' his name be not annext at 5d.	12. 10. 0.
12 Rosarys at 3d.	0. 3. 0.
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We have almost daily small pieces of this nature published here whereof very great numbers are sold by our Hawkers who Cry them about the Streets, if you have the same way of selling them in Edinburgh I doubt not but you may dispose of these in a short time.

Yrs. T.M.

Thomas Mercer's initiative was not to be rewarded, however, nor were the Edinburgh hawkers, or 'running stationers' as they were usually called, to be given the chance of selling either Dr. Tillotson's tracts or rosaries in the streets of Edinburgh. Ogstoun wrote an annotation on the cover of the letter stating that he had sent Mercer's books back to London on Mr. Ellis's order and on Skipper White's ship.²⁰ In May 1688 Mrs. Anderson, the King's printer, seized a shipment of octavo Bibles sent to Ogstoun from London 'on the pretence of an old Act she had discharging the importation of any Bibles of that size, because she could furnish the country; but hers seemed bad, both in the paper and the print'.²¹ Mrs. Anderson's vigorous defence of her various monopolies has been documented elsewhere.²² 1688 was a bad year for Ogstoun's bookselling business: he was also threatened with imprisonment for selling Bishop Usher's *Sermons against the papists* and the *History of the French persecutions*.²³ It was dangerous to sell anti-Popish books during the reign of the Catholic King James II.

Alexander Ogstoun, stationer, died in March 1690, and his burial in Henderson tomb, Greyfriars Churchyard, is recorded under the date 29 March 1690.²⁴ First his widow, and then his children, continued the bookselling and stationery business, and presumably did some bookbinding as well. We can only speculate whether any of them shared Ogstoun senior's superior skills in this latter activity.

OGSTOUN (nee STEVENSON), Martha. Bookseller and stationer in Edinburgh 1680-1715. d.1732

Martha Stevenson married Ogstoun 16 April 1680, and presumably helped him in

his business during his lifetime. If her children Hugh, Alexander, James and Martha were all children of this particular marriage, they were all under ten years of age when their father died. In a disposition registered 31 July 1691, and dated 25 June 1691, one Thomas Robertson disposed to Martha Stevenson and her family the shop 'now possessed by Martha Stevenson in Parliament Close', which suggests that Mrs. Ogstoun had bought the premises which her husband had rented to conduct his business.²⁵ Mrs. Ogstoun sold from the Parliament Close address *The present state of Europe* in 1690, and she is recorded in 1710 as selling a two-volume edition of *The Tatler* from the same address. From 1696, her son Alexander Ogstoun, junior, was associated with her in the family business. He is listed as receiving payments for books sold to Edinburgh University Library on behalf of his mother in 1707, 1708, 1709 and 1710.²⁶ The Poll tax returns of the Old Kirk Parish record that in 1694 Widow Ogstoun was worth between 5,000 and 10,000 merks; had four children, Hew, Alexander, James and Martha; and had two apprentices, John Affleck and David Sinclair. Her house had three hearths, and she took in lodgers.²⁷ The Seafield MSS reveal that the Earl of Seafield was one of her customers.²⁸

Tragedy struck Mrs. Ogstoun in 1712. Sometime before 26 May of that year, her son Alexander committed suicide within the County of York, and his grieving mother was made heir to all of his goods, gear etc. by gift of the Crown. She was then joined in the business by her son James, who became a burges on 22 October 1712 by right of his father. This son died in 1714, aged 25. A year later, Martha Ogstoun decided to retire and made a contract with her surviving son Hugh, dated 16 May 1715, whereby she made over to him 'the hail books bound and unbound, paper, wax, ink, pens and other goods wherein she did trade, then in her possession, in the said shop, her dwelling-house, warehouse in the College and elsewhere.'²⁹ Hugh Ogstoun bound himself to pay off his mother's debts, and to pay her an annuity of £25 sterling *per annum* of which £10 was the rental of the shop in Parliament Close. Sometime before 1722, Mrs. Ogstoun's shop, dwelling-house and cellar in Parliament Close were destroyed by fire. By a further contract, dated 22 February 1722, Hugh paid to his mother £100 sterling to discharge his previous obligations.³⁰ Mrs. Ogstoun's final deal with her son was not an advantageous one. She lived until 1732, her burial taking place on 24 August of that year. Her testament was not registered until 20 January 1738, a fact that has led Bushnell, Foot and others to say that Martha Ogstoun survived her husband by 48 years. The correct figure is 42 years, and she had retired from running the family business 25 years after she took it over.

OGSTOUN, Alexander II, son to Alexander Ogstoun I. Bookseller and stationer in Edinburgh, 1696-1712

The earliest record of Alexander Ogstoun, junior, is the appearance of his name in the imprint of J. Cockburn's *Jacob's vow* (Edinburgh, 1696).³¹ He was associated with his mother in the family business until his death by suicide at York in 1712. The reason for his visit to York is not known. Alexander Ogstoun,

junior, never seems to have become a burghess like his father and brothers. The Privy Seal record of his death reads:

1st July, 1712. Gift by Queen Anne in favour of Martha Ogstoun, widow of the deceased Alexander Ogstoun, Bookseller in Edinburgh, of the escheat of all goods, geir etc. which belonged to the deceased Alexander Ogstoun, her son, and now in the hands of the Crown, through the said Alexander Ogstoun her son being *felo de se* as was found by the inquest of the Coroner of the County of York. Given at St. James' Court, under the Privy Seal, 26 May, 1712.³²

The only known customer of Alexander Ogstoun, junior, is Edinburgh University Library, who made payments to him and his mother 1707-1710.

OGSTOUN, James. Bookseller and stationer in Edinburgh. 1712-14. (b.1689 d.1716, aged 25)

James Ogstoun, brother of the preceding, became burghess and guildbrother of Edinburgh, 22 October 1712, by right of his deceased father, Alexander Ogstoun, senior. He worked in partnership with his mother until his early death in July 1714. The cause of his early death, registered at Greyfriars Churchyard, 30 July 1714, is not recorded. One week after becoming a burghess, James Ogstoun entered James Dickson as an apprentice (29 October 1712), a different James Dickson from the man who was to become a prominent bookseller in Edinburgh in the second half of the eighteenth century. James Ogstoun also registered as apprentice one Alexander Cunningham (2 December 1713). There is no further record of either of these men as journeyman or master. An extant letter from James Ogstoun in Register House reveals him selling *The Spectator* (1713).³³ His will was given up by his sister Martha Ogstoun, and there were no booksellers amongst his debtors.

OGSTOUN, Hugh. Bookseller and stationer in Edinburgh, 1716-1732.

Unlike his unfortunate brothers, Hugh Ogstoun was a prominent Edinburgh bookseller for a fairly lengthy period. He became burghess and guildbrother by right of his father on 4 April 1716.³⁴ He supplied the family of Clerk of Penicuik with books and periodicals over many years, the earliest receipt being dated 1717 and the latest 1732. His name appears in the *Caledonian Mercury* for February 1725. Edinburgh University Library bought books from him in 1718, continuing a long tradition of commercial activity between that university and the Ogstoun family, who apparently had a warehouse on College property in 1715.

BLAIR, Martha (Nee OGSTOUN). Bookseller in Edinburgh ?1714.

Martha Ogstoun, daughter of the late Alexander Ogstoun, bookseller in Edinburgh, married John Blair, merchant, 25 June 1716.³⁵ She was part-owner of the Parliament Close property and probably took a part in the family business — at least before her marriage. She does not seem to be the Mrs. Blair, widow, from whom John Goodall, professor of Greek in Edinburgh University, bought books in July 1711, and whose servant bound books for the University.

Martha Ogstoun's chief claim to fame is that she and her husband had a child in 1718 — one Hugh Blair — who was later to become a Church of Scotland minister, one of the most famous preachers of his time, and Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres in the University of Edinburgh. Hugh Blair, who lived from 1718 to 1800, and died childless, was the Scottish man of letters whose published *Sermons* elicited from Samuel Johnson the extraordinary remark: 'I love Blair's *Sermons*. Though the dog is a Scotchman, and a Presbyterian and everything he should not be; I was the first to praise them.'³⁶

I have not found a record of the date of death of Martha Blair.

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NOTES

¹ Mirjam M. Foot, 'A Binding by Alexander Ogstoun, c. 1680', *The Book Collector* 29(1980), 255-7. Hereinafter referred to as Foot.

² Alexander Ogston, *A Genealogical History of the Families of Ogston*, Edinburgh, 1876; and *Supplement to the Genealogical History of the Families of Ogston*, Edinburgh, 1897. Hereinafter referred to as Ogston.

³ H.R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1668 to 1725*, Oxford, 1922, pp.222-3; and H.G. Aldis, *A List of Books Printed in Scotland before 1700*, Edinburgh, 1970, p.118. Hereinafter referred to as Plomer and Aldis.

⁴ C.B.B. Watson (ed.), *Roll of Edinburgh Burgesses and Guild-Brethren 1406-1700*, Edinburgh, 1929, p.385.

⁵ Foot, p.255, fn.3.

⁶ M. Wood (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh 1665-1680*, Edinburgh, 1950, p.392.

⁷ Ogston, p.95. George Ogstoun, burghess and bookbinder in Aberdeen, owed James Milne, merchant, 146 Pounds Scots in October, 1688. He paid 34 shillings poll-tax in 1696. Aldis, p.168.

⁸ H. Paton (ed.), *The Register of Marriages for the Parish of Edinburgh 1595-1700*, Edinburgh, 1905, p.525.

⁹ H. Paton (ed.), *Register of Interments in the Greyfriars Burying-Ground, Edinburgh 1658-1700*, Edinburgh, 1902, p.322.

¹⁰ M. Wood and H. Armet (eds.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh 1681-9*, Edinburgh, 1954, p.5.

¹¹ C.B.B. Watson (ed.), *The Register of Apprentices in the City of Edinburgh 1666-1700*, Edinburgh, 1929, p.29.

¹² H. Paton (ed.), *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland 1686*, Edinburgh, 1930, Third Series, Vol. XII, p.227.

¹³ Aldis 2609. There is a copy in the National Library of Scotland.

¹⁴ Bond-Shaw to Adamson. General Register of Deeds, Dalrymple Office, Vol. 69, 1005-7. (Scottish Record Office).

¹⁵ R. Steele, *A Bibliography of Royal Proclamations of the Tudor and Stuart Sovereigns...*, New York (Reprint), 1967, Vol. III, no.2502, p.393.

¹⁶ Wood and Armet, pp.97-8.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Mr. W. MacDonald, Secretary and Chamberlain to the Company of Merchants of the City of Edinburgh for a photocopy of this letter and permission to transcribe and publish it. I am also grateful to Mr. Berrill of the Merchants Company for his useful note confirming that Ogstoun was *not* a member of the Company. The letter is part of a series of documents relating to G. Watson & Co.

¹⁸ John Tillotson, 1630-94. Thomas Mercer, for whom there is an entry in Plomer (p.203), was still in business after 1684, the date of Plomer's final reference. I have not found his name in the imprint of any Tillotson item I have personally examined. There is no entry in Wing corresponding exactly to this reference.

¹⁹ Probably Wing T1196.

²⁰ The annotation is dated 28 January 1688. Mr. Ellis has not been identified.

- ²¹ Aldis, p.118.
- ²² J.A. Fairley, *Agnes Campbell, Lady Roseburn, Scottish 'King's Printer'*, Edinburgh, 1925.
- ²³ Aldis, p.118.
- ²⁴ Paton, p.502.
- ²⁵ Disposition — T. Robertson to M. Stevenson, Moses Bundles no. 3928, Edinburgh City Archives.
- ²⁶ R.H. Carnie and R.P. Doig, 'Scottish Printers and Booksellers 1668-1775: A Supplement', *Studies in Bibliography* 12(1960), 151-2.
- ²⁷ M. Wood (ed.) *Edinburgh Poll Tax Returns for 1694*, Edinburgh, 1951, p.58.
- ²⁸ Letter of Account, Mrs. M. Stevenson to the Earl of Seafield, 22 Sept., 1692. (Seafield MSS); A.W.C. Hallen (ed.), *The Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston 1671-1707*, Edinburgh, 1894, p.296.
- ²⁹ Ogston, pp.92-4.
- ³⁰ Ogston, p.94.
- ³¹ Aldis, no.2636.
- ³² Ogston, pp.91-2.
- ³³ RH9/17. General Register House.
- ³⁴ C.B.B. Watson (ed.), *Roll of Edinburgh Burgesses and Guild-Brethren 1701-1760*, Edinburgh, 1930, p.155.
- ³⁵ H. Paton (ed.), *The Register of Marriages for the Parish of Edinburgh 1701-1750*, Edinburgh, 1908, p.417.
- ³⁶ J. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. Hill-Powell, Oxford, 1934, Vol. IV, p.98.

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