

Motions, Puppie Plays, Punch and Pollies: Puppet Theatre in Scotland

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Puppet Theatre has been neglected in historical studies of social culture, theatre, entertainments and amusements in Scotland. It is difficult to be certain of why this might be: perhaps Scottish historians do not consider the puppet theatre to be an important enough canon in the showman's armoury; perhaps it is thought to be a trivial amusement. For too long it has been viewed with some disdain. The attitude could be a remnant of post-Reformation Scotland, with painted wooden figures possibly viewed with some suspicion. Some traditionalists may claim that it is *not traditional* – and yet puppet theatre has been here in Scotland for centuries. It is worth attempting a basic definition of just what exactly a puppet might be. We might consider that a puppet is an object given the appearance of life for the purposes of telling, or acting, a story, or taking part in an entertainment. Such an object may look realistically human, or may be caricatured, or perhaps even abstract; it may be operated from below directly by the operator's hand, or by rods; it may be operated from above by strings, rods or wires; it may be in the form of a projected shadow, operated from behind a screen. Puppets were to be found in small portable booths in fairgrounds and street corners; in larger portable theatres constructed of wood and canvas; in semi-permanent theatres; in village halls and rooms above public houses and inns; they were also to be found in theatres designed for human performers. Just as with musicians, the players of puppets were local, national and international in origin. The aim of this short piece is to demonstrate to archivists and users of archives in Scotland – whether their archives interest is professional or more casual – that puppets have been in use throughout Scotland for many centuries.

A range of official records make occasional reference to puppets and their players. These records include burgh minutes, lists of petty customs and treasurer's accounts. Valuation rolls, local directories and various church records can also reveal relevant information. Genealogical and census sources are worthwhile, although puppet performers are not always listed as such: actor, musician, artist, or theatre manager being among the sometimes stated occupations in these sources, even for performers who fairly exclusively earned their living via puppetry. This last indicates that sometimes performers wanted to, or felt they had to, give the impression of being a little further up the amusements ladder than the term 'puppet' can suggest. This also indicates how lowly puppet shows were sometimes considered. Existing publications can be fruitful also – books and articles on theatre and entertainment in Scotland occasionally shed some light on puppets. Personal memoirs or volumes of snippets on a city, town or area in 'days gone by' can also be worthwhile. Newspapers, accessed by turning bound pages, or by viewing microfilm, or via

digital sources, will turn up advertisements and reviews or reports on puppets. They may also make reference to the players of puppets in reports of crimes or court cases. I have found it to be essential to examine local newspapers as well as the more widely read ones.

It is difficult to be certain about the use of puppets in Scotland during medieval times. Anna Jean Mill's excellent book *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* was based on extensive researches by herself, and by a number of other scholars and library staff. Mill was unable to find any clear evidence of puppets. However, she does report on French minstrels and Italian troupes, including players, jesters, jugglers and others, and it is a possibility that some of these troupes included puppets in addition to rope-dancing, tumbling and other amusements.¹ It is of interest to note that the older Spanish and Italian terms for 'juggler' are related to their terms for puppets, in particular glove or hand puppets.²

It is around the middle of the seventeenth century before we begin to find clear documentary evidence of the use of puppets in Scotland. One of the earliest of these is in a brief article, 'A Seventeenth-Century Reference to String Puppets',³ where S. Musgrove informs us that in a handwritten volume of sermons preached between March 1645 and June 1646, he had come across the word 'puppet' being used as a sort of moral comparison, the usage being almost metaphorical. Although no specific locality is referred to, Musgrove believed that it came from 'north of central Scotland'. The specific sermon was preached on 29 June 1645, and like all else in the volume of sermons, to Musgrove it is clearly Presbyterian:

When we see a puppet play, blocks running and reeling vp and downe cords, and acting seuerall parts, we know there is something behind the Curtaine yt puts them all to worke: So when we see wicked men ... working hurt to the Church ... we may conclude, Ther is some cruell Deuill in the corner that sends abroad these reeling puppets.⁴

Musgrove states that the 'casual tone of the comparison (one of several) also suggests that such plays were available to his congregation'. Giving that some consideration, the sermon would be entirely unsuccessful if the congregation were baffled by it – therefore it would be reasonable to assume that puppet shows where figures were operated by strings or wires would have been known by his congregation. By 'blocks', it could be that the preacher was thinking on the mechanism by which he thought puppets were operated, as in 'block and

¹ A. J. Mill, *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland* (New York and London, 1969 [1924]).

² J. McCormick, *The Italian Puppet Theater* (Iowa City, 2004), 4.

³ S. Musgrove, 'A Seventeenth-Century Reference to String Puppets', *Notes and Queries*, 15, no. 7 (1968), 262. The 600-page volume where the original reference was found has the title of *The Church's Distresse and Her Saviours Delyverance*. In a private correspondence between the author and the widow of S. Musgrove, she states that the volume was purchased in a second-hand bookshop in Glasgow in 1966.

⁴ Musgrove, 'String Puppets', 262.

tackle', as it may have been thought that pulleys, counterweights and various mechanisms were required to bring puppet figures to life. Or he could have been thinking on blocks of wood, a common material from which puppets can be constructed.

The records of local authorities throughout Scotland contain a variety of potentially relevant documents. An examination of the minutes of council committees and subcommittees can produce dividends – sometimes these are indexed, which can assist greatly. In the Burgh Records of Edinburgh we can read of a showman's visit in November 1668: 'The Councell grants warrand to Robert Clerk to use the motione or play called Poor Robin within the cite in his awine chalmer dureing the Counsell's pleasure'.⁵ The following year Edinburgh Town Council granted a licence to 'inglishmen' Robert Clerk and Stephen Grege:

to act thes motions or plays within the cite or suburbs, called pollishingello, or the beating of the sea, or such uther rather motions grin they ar expert, or can exercise and that till the first day of August nixt to come.⁶

It is true that motions were not always plays with puppets, but the implication here is indicative of puppet figures rather than living actors or clockwork mechanisms. It is interesting to note that in the first example, Robert Clerk is to present the play in his 'awine chalmer', or own chamber, or rooms – this suggests that he may have rented a room or rooms specifically for the purpose, or else he was already a resident, although not a native, of Edinburgh. Of particular interest here is that we have a title for the play: *Poor Robin*. It is a possibility that this play involved the character and stories of Robin Hood. May Day plays featuring Robin Hude and Little John appear to have been fairly widespread in Scotland – as in England – over a number of centuries. However, it is the 1669 reference which is arguably of the greatest interest to the historian of puppet theatre, that of the reference to 'pollishingello'. This is almost certainly a character based on the Italian folk puppet Pulcinella. If so, then this is the earliest reference to this puppet character in Scotland – the earliest reference in England being in 1662, which we can read about in Samuel Pepys' diaries.⁷ This is the puppet character generally considered to have been introduced to these islands of Britain by an Italian puppet showman, Pietro Gimonde of Bologna. As the puppet character travelled across Europe the name was altered sometimes along with the character and his actions. In France he became known as 'Polichinelle', altered to 'Punchinello' in Britain, which then became shortened over time to 'Mr Punch'. Mr Punch is a folk-puppet character who over some 350 years has been much more widespread throughout Britain than

⁵ M. Wood (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, A.D. 1665 to 1680* (Edinburgh, 1950), 51, 25 November 1668.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62, 16 June 1669.

⁷ S. Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (various editions), 9 May 1662.

most histories record – perhaps also as with the character of Robin Hood. Interestingly, Robin Hood could be viewed as the common people’s salvation from oppression, while Mr Punch is generally considered as the ‘Common Man’, who does not like authority, pomposity, or being pushed around.

Within the archives held at the Mitchell Library, we can read that in July 1670, the Glasgow Presbytery was informed of the ‘gross scandals’ of a play or plays being performed in the streets – the play was the *Wisdom of Solomon*.⁸ It is not stated if the play was acted by humans or puppets, but some indication that it might have been the latter can be found in the same year within the Burgh Records of Edinburgh, where we can read that James Underwood was given permission to stage the ‘motion or play called the Judgement of Solomon and other plays’.⁹ It was very common for puppets to perform plays based on Biblical stories: these stories would have been well known to the audiences from their church attendances.

In March 1682, Edinburgh Town Council gave William Heartly, a merchant in Edinburgh, permission ‘to erect and caus build ane timber house of fourty foot of length, and twenty foot of breadth, upon the high street, below the Blackfrier Wynd head for showing a motion called The Indian, or the German Wooks’.¹⁰ Very approximately, this would have been a building some 12 metres by 6, not particularly large, especially if for human actors, which suggests that the motion to which the permission referred was to be performed by puppets. Additionally, the expression ‘showing a motion’ sounds much more like puppets than actors. However, some six months later a complaint was made to the council that those who lived nearby were in some way inconvenienced either by the performances themselves, or by the frequency of the performances, and those who attended them. The council ruled that the building was to be demolished and did not allow it to be re-erected in the area of the High Street:

Considering the great complant maid be the heritors and nighboures below Black fryer wyndhead upon the south of the high street upon the accompt of a daill house presently building thereupon be William Heartly for showing some rare showes therin. And also the complant be the nighboures at Niddries wynd heard maid to the Councell upon the accompt of the erecting of the stadge ... And the generall complant maid be the wholl of inhabitants Bearing ther children prentices and servants doe dayly frequent the sieing of the playes and publict showes to the great prejudice of the saids nighboures and inhabitants. And finding that the said stadge and daill house wes to continow allennerly during the Counsell’s pleasure. Therfor the Councell upon the forsaid considerations ordaines the said stadge and daill house to be presently demolished and discharges the same to be againe erected upon any place of the high street in tyme coming.¹¹

⁸ Mitchell Library, CH2/171/6/1, Glasgow Presbytery Records, vol. 6, f. 107v, 20 July 1670.

⁹ M. Wood (ed.), *Extracts*, 87, 28 September 1670.

¹⁰ M. Wood and H. Armet (eds.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, A.D. 1681 to 1689* (Edinburgh, 1954), 40, 17 March 1682.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57, 27 October 1682.

In 1723 Dunbar Burgh Council were so concerned that puppet and other showmen were earning money locally without paying any fee, that in March of that year they agreed that showmen would require a licence from the Magistrates in order to exhibit their shows, whether such shows were public or private. The fee was to be 10 per cent of the takings, which was to be collected by an appointed officer of the town. In addition, a town officer was to attend any such show for the purpose of ‘preventing of disorders’, for which that officer was to be paid by the owner or exhibitor of the show, stating ‘that diverse pupett show men stage w[i]th oth[e]rs and oth[e]rs persons having publict shows to exhibit for money Doe frequentlie repair to this place & carie off considerabl soumes of money from the Inhabitants & oth[e]r persons frequenting the same’.¹²

In searching for historical evidence of puppets, it has been essential to consider as many sources of evidence as possible – all the more so as it seems that relatively little documentation has survived. In many cases it may be that no evidence was recorded in the first place. Sometimes several brief references within different sources to a particular performer can occur across a number of years. The earliest reference I have found to the puppet showman Thomas Smith, is where the North Leith Kirk Session noted an ‘irregular marriage’ between Smith and Jane Crawford.¹³ Smith was rather impressively described as ‘Master of the Figure Play’, which may refer to an entry in the Old Parish Register from 18 July 1719, which suggests there was a marriage contract between Smith and Crawford.¹⁴ The next reference to this showman is from 1730, and is within a licence for Smith to use trumpet, drum or fife to advertise his puppet performances. A reproduction of this licence appears in Paul McPharlin’s historical book on the puppet theatre in America. The licence was issued to Smith by John Shore,¹⁵ the Serjeant-Trumpeter to George II, and ran for a period of one year, expiring on 1 August 1731. The licence includes: ‘authorife and appoint you Thomas Smith, Merchant & Burgefz from Jedburg to make ufe of any Trumpet, Drum, or Fife, at and for your Shew of Puppets within his Majefty’s Realm of Great Britain’.¹⁶

An interesting source of information has been lists of petty customs. These were charges made in towns and burghs for selling various items, such as meal, butter, coals or tallow. There were also charges levied on performers

¹² National Records of Scotland (hereafter NRS), B18/13/3, Records of Dunbar Burgh, Council Minutes, 29 March 1723.

¹³ J. S. Marshall, *Old Leith at Leisure* (Edinburgh, 1976), 80. The reference is to a North Leith Kirk Session on 13 September 1720.

¹⁴ NRS, Old Parish Registers, Marriages, 417/0010 0256 Crail. In this entry, Crawford’s forename is unclear.

¹⁵ John Shore (1662–1752) became Serjeant-Trumpeter from 1707 until his death: P. H. Highfill, K. A. Burnim and E. A. Langhans, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, XIII (Carbondale, IL, 1991), 365–6.

¹⁶ P. McPharlin, *The Puppet Theatre in America* (Boston, MA, 1969), 20.

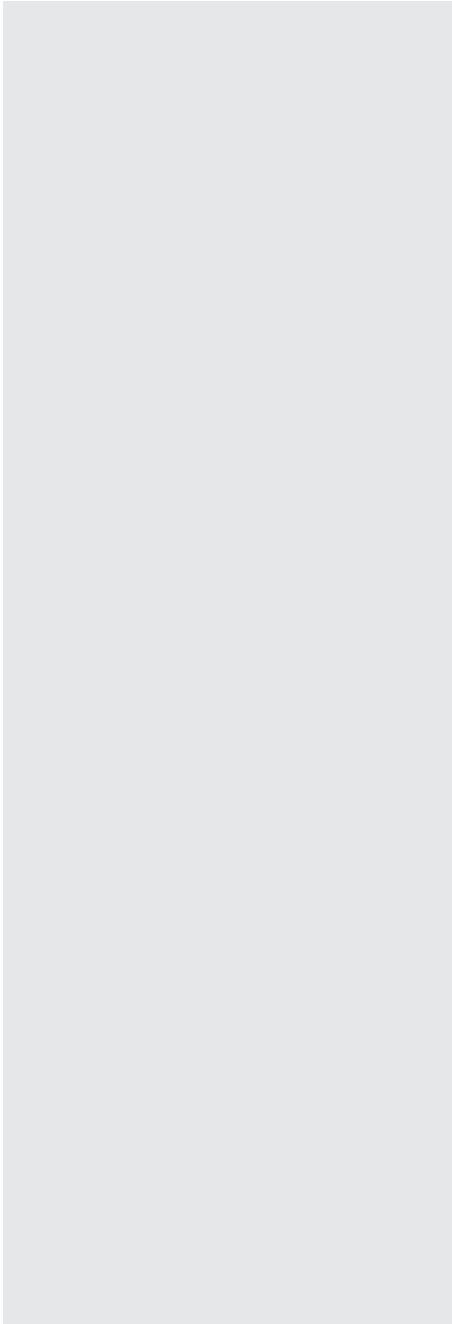


Plate 1
Table of the Customs ...,
Scottish Borders Archives,
Hawick Farmers Club SBA/67/3/4.

| Details | £ | s | d |
|--|---|---|---|
| Each load of Carrots, or other Roots, for sale | | | 1 |
| Each man's load of Bread, for sale | | | ½ |
| Each horse load of Bread, for sale | | | 1 |
| Every boll of Meal | | | 1 |
| Every pack of Wool | 1 | 2 | |
| Plays and Puppet-shews, each night | 1 | | |
| Wild Beasts, in Caravans, if only one Caravan, to pay each night | 1 | | |
| But if more than one, to pay for each additional Caravan | | | 6 |

Table 1 From the *Table of the Shore-dues, Anchorages, Customs, &c. of the Burgh of Pittenweem ...*, 29 September 1821, Fife Archives, FC/CS/7/3/5/22.

and showmen attending fairs, races, or who were setting up their show within a town market. Many of these lists refer generally to plays or performances, others make specific reference to puppet shows. Often the petty customs of a town or burgh was sold by roup – or auction – to an individual, which would provide an income without the costs associated with collecting the fees.¹⁷ One result of this is that there appear to be few official documents which contain a detailed list of showmen and the fees paid. The Burgh of Elgin has a list of petty customs which states: ‘Ilk mountebank stage or any other stage, stand or table for plays, ilk day 6s. Ilk puppy or juggler play for ilk day it is acted 2s’.¹⁸ The words ‘puppy’ or ‘puppie’ were terms sometimes used for puppet. Plate 1 shows the *Table of the Customs belonging to His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch, leviable in the town of Hawick*. The sheet is dated at Branxholm on 10 June 1797, and informs us that a puppet showman would have to pay 2d to the Duke’s Tacksman for a day at the fair. Fife Archives have a large bill for the *Table of the Shore-dues, Anchorages, Customs, &c. of the Burgh of Pittenweem; As revised, fixed, and approved of, by the Magistrates and Town Council of said Burgh, on the 29th day of September, 1821 years*.¹⁹ In this case, many of the listings have three different rates: Freemen; Stranger Burgesses; Unfreemen. Table 1 lists some of the entries, but for clarity and simplification only includes the rates for Unfreemen. The ephemera collection in Dundee Central Library includes the ‘Table of the Customs to be paid at the First Lady Mary Fair of Dundee’.²⁰ This document,

¹⁷ I. McCraw, *The Fairs of Dundee* (Dundee, 1994), 48.

¹⁸ W. Cramond, *The Records of Elgin, 1234–1800*, I, New Spalding Club, 27 (Aberdeen, 1903), 467, 24 August 1752.

¹⁹ Fife Archives, FC/CS/7/3/5/22, *Table of the Shore-dues, Anchorages, Customs, &c. of the Burgh of Pittenweem ...*, 29 September 1821.

²⁰ Dundee Central Library, Lamb Collection, 379(93), *Table of the Customs to be paid at the First Lady Mary Fair of Dundee*, c.1855.

dating from the mid-1850s, includes ‘Each Puppet Show 18sh/1sh 6d’, the former value being in Scots money, the latter in Sterling.

Fiction and poetry can also provide information. A particularly interesting example of descriptive verse can be found in the papers of the Clerk family of Penicuik held at the National Records of Scotland. Dated 1731, this verse was written by Sir John Clerk (1676–1755), the second Baronet of Penicuik, and is titled ‘A prologue to Punch’s Farce – for the Bairns at Pennykuick’.²¹ Today, we think of the typical Punch show as including Mr Punch’s wife, who has generally been called Judy since around the early 1800s, although prior to this she was known as Joan. This example of verse begins: ‘Here little punch before you stands ...’ then goes on to describe Punch, suggesting a large nose and stomach. Punch wonders who he will marry:

Beware ye misses of all strife
Which of you shall be my wife
I know myself four pretty Lasses
And each for a great Beauty passes.²²

Punch then names the four lasses as Kate, Polly, Meg and lastly Mary, who is described a little unkindly as ‘girning, witch-faced Mary’. It will be of interest to the scholar of Punch and Judy, and of popular puppet theatre in general, to note the absence of the names of either Judy or Joan. At the time of this poem, it is generally considered that the name of Punch’s wife was Joan, although he did have a girlfriend or mistress called Polly, and so it is interesting to see the latter name occurring in this verse. It could be that the verse refers to an earlier version of the Punch and Joan/Judy show, but containing perhaps different aspects of Punch’s life – in this case while he was still a bachelor. However, it is also a possibility that the verse – described as a ‘prologue’ – was designed to give children an idea of what could have happened to Punch prior to him being married. In our modern times of the ‘Star Wars’ series of films this might be considered as a ‘prequel’. Regardless, it is a very interesting glimpse at some of Mr Punch’s antics in the relatively early years of his puppet show.

Household and Estate account books contain a wide range of material, so it is no surprise to find entertainments and amusements being included. Table 2 lists entries which refer to puppet shows of some kind. It is likely that the sums described were in Scots money, rather than Sterling. Unfortunately the account books give no indication of the type of puppet show, nor the name of the play or performer. The exception to this is an entry from the Innes family account books, where the description is of ‘Les Ombres Chinsois’. This is a misspelling of ‘Les Ombres Chinoises’, which were shadow-puppet performances inspired by Chinese shadow-puppet plays seen by Europeans when visiting China.

²¹ NRS, GD18/4406/1, Sir John Clerk, ‘A prologue to Punch’s Farce – for the Bairns at Pennykuick’, 1731.

²² Ibid.

| Date/Year | Description | £ | s | d | Archival (or other) source |
|------------------|---|----------|----------|----------|---|
| 1667 | To, Jas and Wm for seeing the puppie play | | 6 | | Old Ross-shire and Scodland, from National Library of Scotland, R.249.9, Factor's Account Book |
| 1 April 1672 | to the children to see the puppie play, and for curds and whey at leith wind craigs | 1 | 5 | | National Library of Scotland, SCS.SHS.16, Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston |
| 1688-89 | seeing a puppet play | | | | Bute Family archive, NRS, NRAS631/3/10/Bundle 5 |
| 14 Dec 1705 | to the bairns and servants to see the puppie play yisterday | | 5 | | National Library of Scotland, SCS.SHS.16, Account Book of Sir John Foulis of Ravelston |
| 1725 | at the puppet show | | 6 | | NRS, GD 248/205/5/6, Misc. accounts due by Sir Ludovick Grant or Colquhoun |
| 1733-34 | To, Seeing a puppet show | | | 2 | Expenses of Sir James Grant of Grant for his son Mr Charles to J. Leftie, schoolmaster of Dalkeith, from NRS, GD 248/105/3/3, Rosedoe and Edinburgh household accounts, mainly Colquhoun of Lauss |
| 16 Feb 1770 | Seeing a Puppet Show | | | 6 | NRS GD 113/5/419/2/1, Account books of the Innes family |
| 29 Jan 1784 | admittance [<i>sic</i>] to the Puppet shows | | 1 | | Ibid. |
| 18 Apr 1785 | For seeing Les Ombres Clinsois [<i>sic</i>], Tumbling &c | | 1 | | Ibid. |

Table 2 Some relevant entries from household or estate account books.

Whereas the Chinese performers used very colourful transparent figures, in Europe the figures were generally more like solid silhouettes, although sometimes they could be very elaborately cut out. Speaight records several appearances of the Ombres Chinoises in London from December 1775, sometimes running for fairly lengthy seasons.²³ It is very likely that in earlier days, some puppet showman would have included a form of shadow puppetry, perhaps within a peep show or raree show.

Puppets were sometimes used by stage doctors as part of various entertainments presented while trying to sell cure-all-ill medicines. An interesting example of this is within the papers of the MacPherson-Grant family of Ballindalloch. In a letter dated 25 March 1795, Alexander Grant despairs that their former housekeeper has ‘married a Blackguard fellow that has been going thro the country as a Stage Doctor or Puppet showman’.²⁴ Grant refers to his belief that the showman had debt, and that his creditors will take any property and all she may have. As she was still due a balance of her housekeeper’s salary, Grant feared that this would bypass her, and go straight to the showman’s creditors.

Newspapers are another useful source of information, and historical newspapers can be accessed either by turning the pages of bound volumes; by looking through microfilms; or by searching digitised scans on the Internet. Not all puppet showmen advertised in newspapers, as it would have been relatively costly, but in addition to occasional advertisements, there can also be found reports of fairs where puppet shows had been seen. If the showman had been involved in a crime, either as perpetrator or victim, then court reports can sometimes provide references. In early May of 1749, the *Aberdeen Journal* carried an advertisement for Alexander Thomson’s collection of waxwork figures, described as being ‘as big as the Life’.²⁵ Thomson also advertised his ‘wonderful and surprising DEXTERITY OF HAND’. It is likely the latter boast referred to his conjuring skills. It was not uncommon for marionette shows to be described as being something which sounded a little more technical, or scientific, than a puppet show, and it can take careful reading of an advertisement to attempt to deduce the type of performance. Other such alternative descriptions included: moving figures; automaton; moving waxworks; mechanical theatre. Thomson’s show appears to have been with puppets rather than waxworks, as later in the year the *Caledonian Mercury* carried an extract of a letter regarding a court-case in Aberdeen. A man called Scoutchie had appeared in court charged with attempted rape and was described as being ‘drummer to one Thomson, Master of a Puppet-show’. A newspaper report later informed that Scoutchie had been sentenced, and that he was whipped ‘through the City’.²⁶

²³ G. Speaight, *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (Carbondale, IL, 1990), 142–6.

²⁴ National Register of Archives for Scotland, 771/Bundle 1303, Papers of the MacPherson-Grant family, Baronets, of Ballindalloch, entry included in 25 March 1795.

²⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 2 May 1749.

²⁶ *Caledonian Mercury*, 9 October and 2 November 1749.

Previously we considered a reference in some family accounts to shadow puppets: an early newspaper advertisement for a performance which included shadow puppets is from June 1785.²⁷ This took place in the 'large Dancing Hall above the Weigh-house, Candleriggs', and commenced with a female performer who danced on the slack wire while balancing various items, such as swords and plates. The second part of the entertainment was described as being 'Quite a New and Grand Exhibition of LES OMBRES CHINOISES, Consisting of a Variety of SCENES AND FIGURES'.²⁸ This consisted of several scenes:

1st. A Comic Scene, taken from the Public Gardens at Paris; or, the Macaroni's Escape from a Shower of Rain. In this piece a Hornpipe will be introduced before the rain.

2d. The Duck Hunting; or, the Active Fisherman.

3d. A Comic Scene, called 'The Disappointed Traveller.' THE BROKEN BRIDGE; Or the Peasant Rewarded for his Incivility.

4th. A Humorous Scene of a Cobbler's Wife and Child; or, 'The Cat's Escape with the Dinner out of the Pot,' &c.

5th. A Sea Storm, amazingly executed, with Thunder and Lightning, Ships in Distress, Shipwreck, and Sea Monsters appearing, &c, &c, as is well known at Astley's Riding School, Westminster Bridge.²⁹

From February to September 1786 there were a series of advertisements in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* for 'Les Varieties Amusantes', which were being performed at the back of the Black Bull Inn, in Edinburgh's Pleasance area.³⁰ These entertainments included the 'much admired OMBRES IMPALPABLE', which very much sounds like it could be similar to the Ombres Chinoises performance. The rest of the entertainments on offer were rope-dancing and a pantomime; the performances were under the name of a Monsieur Dubois. In 1816 there was a further appearance, this time at Corri's Rooms, where there was held a Valentine's Day Ball, essentially a masked ball, but which included 'Un Petit Theatre des Ombres Chinoises'.³¹ It is likely there were

²⁷ *Glasgow Mercury*, 2 June 1785. The earliest reference I have come across to these shadow puppets in Scotland is almost a decade earlier, when the *Caledonian Mercury* of 19 November 1777 carried an advertisement for an entertainment at the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, which included Ombres Chinoises performances presented by Messrs Brunn and Ambrose. Speaight, in *The History of the English Puppet Theatre* (Carbondale, IL, 1990), 142-3, reports Messrs Ambrose and Brunn as presenting shadow performances in the Great Room in Pantion Street, London, from December 1775 till around July 1777. Despite the marginal spelling difference, these are clearly the same performers out on tour.

²⁸ *Glasgow Mercury*, 2 June 1785.

²⁹ *Glasgow Mercury*, 2 June 1785. The admittance price was 1s. for the Pit, and 6d. for the Gallery.

³⁰ *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 28 February, 8 September and 12 September 1786.

³¹ *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 2 and 18 February 1816.

other performances with shadow puppets: certainly marionette showman sometimes included a section with shadows – on occasion a complete ‘shadow pantomime’ – as part of their act. An example of this would be the marionette proprietor Sam Baylis’s inclusion of ‘Ombres Vivants’ at the Mechanics’ Hall in Aberdeen during his run there in December 1858.³²

We have already considered that detailed information on fees paid by named showmen appears to be lacking in many local authority archives. An exception can be found in the Perth and Kinross Council Archive where there are several volumes of particular interest. These are part of the Perth Treasurer’s Accounts, and include extracts from both the Show Caravan, and the City Hall Accounts. These contain the names of a number of showmen, and although they seldom state the type of show or stance, some of the names are familiar as being either puppet showmen or showmen who often used puppets among their range of entertainments. Tables 3 and 4 list those with a known puppet or ventriloquism connection. I have included waxworks and ghost-show illusions, both of which were sometimes found in the amusements on offer from puppet showmen. It should be noted that there are many unfamiliar names in the volumes of extracts, and it would seem likely that a proportion of those names also could have had a puppet involvement. Table 3 commences with John Holden: this is almost certainly the John Holden who, with his family, had a long association with the marionette theatre, and who built up an international reputation for fine marionettes and manipulation. The 1859 reference to ‘Frank Cadoni’ gives us a link to one of Scotland’s most well-known show families, although now the surname is most often spelled as ‘Codona’, but in the past has been Cardoni, Cadone, Cadoni, Cardownie and other variants. Frank was a descendant – likely the grandson – of Francesco Cardoni, who was born in Italy and arrived in Britain before the end of the eighteenth century. Francesco Cardoni was an entertainer who included juggling among his skills, and was certainly one of the first to perform the Punch show with glove puppets in Scotland.³³ Several of his descendants have performed with marionettes and Punch and Judy, the most recent of which may have been John Codona (1895–1964). The book *Showfolk* by Frank Bruce is a marvellous source of information on the Codona family.³⁴ It covers several strands of the family, and the shows and attractions on offer, including a number of family members skilled in marionettes and Punch and Judy. The book includes information on a Francesco Cardoni (c.1893–1977), who performed his Pulcinella shows in Rome for many decades, and who may well have a family connection to the Francesco Cardoni who performed Punch and Judy at Glasgow Fair and elsewhere.³⁵ Another reference in the accounts is to a ‘peep show’, which may not strictly have involved puppets, but was certainly a related form of entertainment. The likelihood is that it was an easily portable

³² *Aberdeen Journal*, 22 December 1858.

³³ M. MacGilp, *A Timber Idol: Mr Punch in Scotland* (Inverness, 2012), 127–8.

³⁴ F. Bruce, *Showfolk: An Oral History of a Fairground Dynasty* (Edinburgh, 2010).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 234–5.

PUPPET THEATRE IN SCOTLAND

| Date | Details | £ | s | d |
|-------------|----------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 04.09.1856 | John Holden 3 days wagon & Booth | | 7 | 6 |
| 07.09.1856 | John Holden 1 day | | 2 | 6 |
| 02.07.1859 | Frank Cadoni 1 day of a Booth | | 2 | 6 |
| 23.08.1865 | Peep Show for 1 day | | 5 | |
| 23.07.1870 | Sangers Waxwork for two days | 2 | 2 | |
| 03.09.1870 | The Ghost Show | | | |
| 15.06.1872 | Henry Duckworth for two days | | 9 | |
| 19.06.1872 | Henry Duckworth for three days | | 6 | |
| 14.07.1872 | John Morrison Photographer | | 2 | |
| 27.08.1872 | Waxwork for the 26th | | 17 | 6 |
| 28.08.1872 | Waxwork for two days | | 15 | |
| 11.10.1873 | John Morrison | | 3 | |
| 19.08.1874 | John Morrison 1 day | | 6 | |
| 23.08.1874 | John Morrison 2 days | | 2 | |
| 14.10.1874 | John Morrison Shooting Gallery | | 6 | 6 |
| 06.07.1881 | Morrison | | 6 | |
| 31.03.1891 | WD Morrison | | 4 | |
| 24.03.1894 | Morrison | | 5 | |
| 28.07.1894 | Morrison (week) | | 3 | |
| 30.04.1896 | Holden (4 days) | | 6 | |
| 31.03.1897 | Morrison | | 6 | |
| 10.04.1897 | Morrison | | 10 | |
| 04.05.1899 | Codona Ghost Illusion | 3 | | |
| 15.03.1901 | Morrison, week | | 2 | 6 |
| 16.04.1901 | Morrison to 20th inst | | 6 | |

Table 3 Extracts from the Show Caravan Accounts, in Perth and Kinross Council Archive, B59/19, Perth Treasurer's Accounts.

box, which may have been in a barrow or even hung around the showman's neck, rather like the one used by the cinema or theatre employee who sells tubs of ice cream during the interval. This box would have had one or more viewing holes, or small apertures, where the public could look in and see various scenes – there was probably a certain amount of movement, either of small figures or scenery. However, as the fee for the 'peep show' in question was twice the price of Cadoni's some six years earlier, it may indicate that it was a larger booth or wagon. Several waxwork exhibitions are listed, and while waxworks are not puppets, sometimes waxwork proprietors also had an involvement with marionettes. A couple of ghost shows are referenced, including one under the Codona name. Ghost shows were a form of optical illusion, where a large

glass was carefully positioned in the auditorium area so that objects and figures could be reflected onto it, therefore appearing to be on stage when in fact they were usually below it. This was particularly effective in creating spectral or ghostly effects, hence the name ‘ghost show’. The physical space required both for the ‘performance’ and for the audience in a ghost show was very similar to that required for a marionette exhibition. There appears to have been a clerical error with the recording of one of the ghost shows, as no fee is stated. Henry Duckworth is mentioned as having a five-day visit in 1872, there being a possible anomaly in that the first two days cost more than the following three days, although there may have been some sort of reduction applied. Duckworth ran a number of entertainments and amusements, including skating rinks and Punch and Judy, and for many years was resident in Aberdeen.³⁶

Commencing from July 1872 we find references to John Morrison, listed first as a photographer, but as the years pass there is a reference to a shooting gallery. It was John’s son, William Duncan Morrison, who added the Punch and Judy show to the range of amusements the family offered.³⁷ There are several references to W. D. Morrison in these records also, but unfortunately they do not list the amusements he was offering at the time. His week-long stay in 1894 appears to have only cost three shillings, so presumably the booth he was using was fairly small. Although John Morrison is probably the first of that family to become involved with the world of shows and fairgrounds, some members of the Morrison family have continued with the fairground tradition, although not with a puppetry involvement. Census and genealogical records reveal that John Morrison was born in Ayrshire circa 1830, with the 1851 census recording him as an equestrian, while the 1871 census states that he was a fairground photographer.³⁸

The Holden surname occurs again in 1896, this time for a four-day stay at the end of April, which cost six shillings. While we cannot say for certain that this was the Holden’s marionette company, there is other evidence to suggest that it could have been. From newspaper advertisements we can see that Holden’s Marionettes had a long booking at the *National Trades and Industrial Exhibition*, where they appeared from early November 1895 till the end of January 1896 at Duke Street, Glasgow.³⁹ It would seem highly likely that the company would try to avoid excessive travel costs by doing a circuit of fairgrounds that were relatively close to each other.

Table 4 lists some extracts from the Perth City Hall Accounts, where we can see that one ‘Professor’ Ewart made bookings in 1856, 1859 and 1861.

³⁶ MacGilp, *Timber Idol*, 68–9.

³⁷ I have written in more detail on the Punch and Judy aspect of the Morrison family shows in MacGilp, *Timber Idol*, 26–7, 50–2, 90, 96, 104–7, 126, 132.

³⁸ Genealogical and census material sourced from <http://scotlandsppeople.gov.uk>.

³⁹ Various advertisements in the *Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald* from September 1895 to January 1896.

PUPPET THEATRE IN SCOTLAND

| Date | Details | £ | s | d |
|-------------|------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| 24.05.1856 | Prof Ewart 1 days rent of hall | 1 | 11 | 6 |
| 09.07.1856 | Mr Gompertz to a/c of rent 1 week | 5 | | |
| 17.07.1856 | Mr Gompertz in full 1 week | 4 | 9 | |
| 23.09.1856 | Mr Gompertz 1 week rent of hall | 9 | 9 | |
| 16.06.1858 | Harry Hamilton Panorama | 11 | | |
| 22.12.1859 | Prof Ewart 2 nights | 3 | 8 | |
| 29.01.1861 | Mr Gompertz deposit of rent | 1 | | |
| 09.02.1861 | Mr Gompertz balance | 7 | | |
| 08.06.1861 | Prof Ewart 1 day | 1 | 14 | |
| 18.06.1861 | Prof Ewart 1 day | 1 | 1 | |
| 10.10.1862 | Gompertz Panorama 11 days | 12 | | |
| 05.12.1864 | Mr Gompertz 13 nights plus Fires | 14 | 5 | 6 |
| 03.01.1865 | Mrs Springthorpe deposit | 1 | | |
| 09.01.1865 | Mrs Springthorpe balance 3 days | 3 | 13 | |
| 22.06.1865 | Mr Devon 1 night | 1 | 14 | |
| 14.11.1865 | Mr Devon Hall & Fires 13th Nov | 1 | 15 | |
| 19.12.1867 | Gompertz 17 days & fires | 29 | | |
| 05.05.1868 | Gompertz 7 days | 12 | 16 | 8 |
| 30.09.1871 | Hamilton's Panorama | 17 | 12 | 6 |
| 30.09.1871 | Springthorpe deposit | 5 | | |
| 11.11.1871 | Springthorpe balance | 18 | 5 | |
| 26.09.1874 | Snr Bosco deposit | | 10 | |
| 21.10.1874 | Snr Bosco | 2 | 5 | |
| 17.02.1875 | Prof Christo deposit | | 10 | |
| 15.03.1875 | Prof Christo 13th | 2 | 17 | |
| 15.03.1875 | Prof Christo balance | 2 | 7 | |
| 05.10.1875 | Prof Christo deposit | 1 | 10 | |
| 20.08.1877 | W Bullock (deposit) | 5 | | |
| 13.11.1877 | W Bullock (balance) | 13 | 15 | |
| 13.12.1880 | Pepper's Ghost (2 weeks) | 23 | 2 | |
| 01.03.1886 | Pepper's Ghost | 11 | 11 | |
| 12.03.1892 | Pepper's Ghost | 11 | 18 | |
| 21.02.1893 | Hamilton's Diorama (week) | 12 | 4 | |
| 16.03.1895 | Hamilton's Diorama (week) | 12 | 4 | |
| 12.08.1897 | Dr Ormonde deposit for 3,4,5th Nov | 2 | | |
| 05.11.1897 | Dr Ormonde balance | 7 | | |
| 27.07.1901 | Dr Ormonde deposit 23rd October | | 10 | |
| 23.10.1901 | Dr Ormonde balance | 3 | 1 | |

Table 4 Extracts from the City Hall Accounts, in Perth and Kinross Council Archive, B59/19, Perth Treasurer's Accounts.

John J. Ewart was a ventriloquist, born in Leith around 1830.⁴⁰ We can trace advertisements for Ewart in 1856 at Bridge of Allan and Stirling, where his performance included vocal illusions ‘from a Mewing Kitten to a Snarling Mastiff’.⁴¹ Also included was his ‘Imitation of a Hive of Bees’, and various voices appearing to come from behind closed doors or from down in the cellar.⁴² It is clear from these advertisements that Ewart did not use a puppet figure in his ventriloquism, but instead employed his art to make his voice appear to come from elsewhere on the stage or in the room. For Ewart’s appearance at Perth in 1861, he boasted in his advertisements that he was ‘under the immediate Patronage of the different Masonic Lodges in Perth, and the Brethren of the Mystic Tie in the District’.⁴³ Bookings from other ventriloquists appear in the extracts, such as Bosco, Devon, Christo and Ormonde. The Springthorpe company made bookings twice at Perth City Hall, the first in 1865 when they presented their waxwork exhibition, possibly with a number of concert artistes. By the time Springthorpe returned to Perth in 1871, they had abandoned waxworks and were presenting marionettes. They had just completed a three-month season at the Mechanics’ Hall in Aberdeen.⁴⁴ Their repertoire at this point included the *Forty Thieves*, *Babes in the Wood*, *Bluebeard*, the *Illustrious Stranger*, and a marionette pantomime of *Beauty and the Beast*. A local newspaper report stated that the ‘entertainment – unique of its kind, and worth seeing by young and old – is still open, and will continue so during this week. We advise all who can go to go and see it’.⁴⁵ Of note also in these extracts, is the appearance of William Bullock in November 1877. Bullock paid £18 15s. for his period of let, one of many appearances in Scotland around that time for Bullock’s Royal Marionettes. Bullock was one of the most successful of the Victorian-era marionette proprietors, and although he himself was not a performer, he was skilful in his use of advertisements. At Perth they presented a marionette pantomime of Red Riding Hood, along with a number of marionette variety acts, the whole lasting for around two hours, the local press in praising their performances stated that the ‘entertainment still continues to maintain its popularity and fill the City Hall’.⁴⁶

A period approximating Victoria’s reign (1837–1901) is considered to be an important era for the popularity and development of the marionette show, although generally those dates could be extended perhaps to 1800–1914. We have seen that some of the larger marionette companies, such as Bullock, Holden, and Springthorpe, among others, regularly toured in Scotland – but there were smaller, locally based marionette companies also. Occasionally one

⁴⁰ Genealogical and census material sourced from <http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk>.

⁴¹ *Stirling Observer*, 12 June and 10 July 1856.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal*, 13 June 1861.

⁴⁴ *Aberdeen Free Press*, various advertisements from June to August 1871.

⁴⁵ *Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Journal*, 9 November 1871.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12 November 1877.

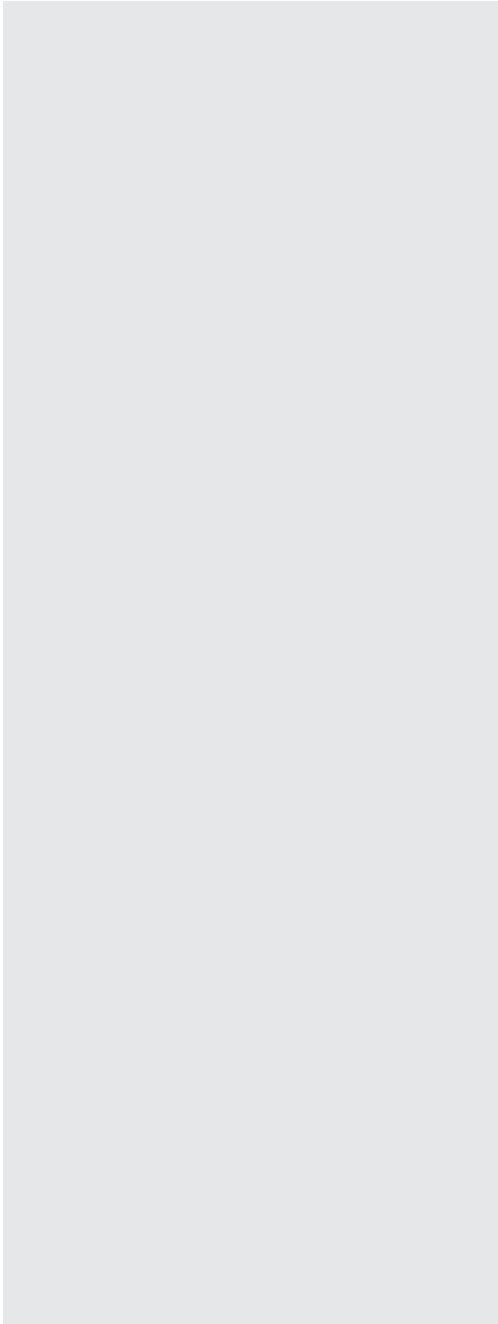


Plate 2
Playbill advertising the
'Cabinet of Mirth and
Mystery!', Dumfries and
Galloway Archives, RG2/6/38.
Reproduced courtesy of
Dumfries and Galloway
Archives.

of these might set up a fairly permanent theatre. One of the most well-known examples would be William Mumford, who ran his Mechanical Theatre in the Saltmarket area of Glasgow for around ten years. While running the theatre, he sometimes continued to perform in a fairground booth in other parts of the central belt of Scotland. In books of reminiscences of ‘old Glasgow’, he is most often referred to as a drunk actor-manager, but the bulk of the contemporary references and advertisements I have come across refer to his puppet figure performances and transformations. Describing some amusements on offer in Aberdeen pre-1850, William Skene informs us that one winter in the Union Buildings there were ‘two rival marionette shows running, conducted respectively by Tammy Fraser and Sandy Ruddiman, the joiner, a capital hand at the business’.⁴⁷ Other showmen toured with their marionettes, for example Billy Purvis and Sam Baylis, while the largely Fife-based William Stephens presented very popular marionette performances mainly throughout Fife and Angus between the late 1830s till the early 1880s. Other showmen and companies have left little or – likely – no trace in the official records or in memoirs. Plate 2 shows an interesting example of a playbill dating probably from the 1850s. Billed as the ‘Cabinet of Mirth and Mystery!’, it advertised that Mr Duffino was presenting his amusements in two parts, commencing with ‘Feats of Dexterity’, being followed by a trained dog, continuing with juggling and balancing. The Royal Marionette Figures appeared in the second part, followed by what sounds like an escapology act. The bill then states that on the Saturday there would be a performance ‘expressly for School Children’ of *The Babes in the Wood*. This was one of the most popular and common of nineteenth-century marionette pantomimes, which was also in the repertoire of both Mumford and Stephens.

Some showmen used puppets as part of their range of amusements, while others solely performed with puppets. Some who used puppets focused primarily on Punch and Judy, or on the presentation of traditional trick marionette acts, such as the disjointing skeleton, and various transformation figures. Others, Mumford and Stephens being good examples, regularly performed dramas with their marionettes – in the case of Stephens, over some five decades of performing. David Prince Miller was a humble showman, who longed to present drama with human actors in a permanent theatre owned and run by himself, but often ran into financial, licensing or legal difficulties, or the perennial problem of wooden structures – fire. But Miller, although at core a conjurer who often performed with Punch and Judy and marionettes, may never have presented dramas with puppets, his marionette shows being the traditional trick acts. It is interesting also to consider the different ways in which the showman would make his performance available to the public, and how that changed over the centuries. In earlier times, showmen would appear with a booth or canvas tent at fairgrounds, trysts or at markets. Some would rent a room – perhaps from an inn – to present their show. Just prior

⁴⁷ W. Skene, *East Neuk Chronicles* (Aberdeen, 1905), 24.

to the music-hall era, singing saloons, and free and easies presented vocalists, musicians, comedians, but sometimes included puppets, such as Sam Baylis and his 'ingenious Automata'.⁴⁸

The main aim of this short piece has been to present to users of historical archives, some of the primary-source evidence of the historical performers and performances of puppet theatre in Scotland. Even although puppets are so rarely referred to in books on Scottish theatre and entertainment, this should demonstrate – in particular to non-puppetry specialists – that there is a long tradition here in Scotland of this vibrant form of popular theatre. However, puppet theatre is not just a tradition of the past, it is a tradition that invents, reinvents, survives and continues.

⁴⁸ Quotation from *Guide to Glasgow Fair*, a pamphlet in the Collection of the University of Glasgow Library. Although undated, it likely originates from around 1850. The Oddfellow's Music Saloon was in the Saltmarket, and was established by Samuel Sloan, whose wife was Mary Baylis. The Baylis name is important in Glasgow entertainment, and possibly her brother James Baylis took over the running of the Oddfellows. Sam Baylis, probably another relative, worked there as a scene painter and also presented his puppet acts. See <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Glasgow/SingingSaloonsSaltmarket.htm> for more detail on Glasgow music saloons. Also P. Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall 1850–1914* (Manchester, 2003), 63.