

**THE SIGNET LIBRARY  
EDINBURGH**

*by*

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The Signet Library is different. For almost 200 years now it has adopted the policy of buying general books as well as legal ones. Nominally, these books have been for the use and requirements of its members, the Writers to the Signet, but in practice, it has always been the wish of the Society to encourage the use of its Library by outsiders. Many other libraries of private societies have made a point of stocking general books as well as those specifically pertaining to their particular field. But in the realm of law at least, the Signet Library is the only library left in Scotland which still has a large general collection as well as a legal one.

The Library thus became known as a centre of learning in its own right. It has never hoped to rival its neighbour, the library of the Faculty of Advocates (with its privilege of copyright), which rightly became known as the National Library of Scotland long before its formal handing over to the nation in 1925. Nevertheless, the Signet Library has acted in complementary fashion to it and possesses a number of works on Scotland not in the national collection, along with a considerable body of foreign literature.

The Library's purpose is to serve the legal, and to a lesser extent, the recreational, reading requirements of its members. Most of its routine is concerned with providing a variety of books and pamphlets on law, and information on legal queries. The most frequently consulted section is one which is relatively small—the 200 or so titles which comprise the standard Scots Law text books. This may seem an insignificant number but it must be remembered that economics make Scottish law publishing a risky business while a number of titles, although 50 years old, are still the appropriate authority, e.g., "Goudy on Bankruptcy". Although published in 1914 this is still the "bible" on bankruptcy, as the last Scottish Act was passed in 1913. Similarly, there are relatively few Scottish legal periodicals, the main one being the "Scots Law Times". Others include the "Journal of the Law Society of Scotland", the "Scottish Law Gazette", and the "Juridical Review"; formerly long-established journals such as the "Scottish Law Review" and the "Scottish Law Reporter" have been defunct for some time. Scottish case law is covered by the "Session Cases" which have been published continuously since 1821, although their predecessors go back considerably before then. These concern selected civil cases only, criminal

reports appearing in "Justiciary Cases" from 1819 to date. In addition, there are the "Sheriff Court Reports", containing both civil and criminal cases, and the "Scottish Land Court Reports".

With regard to the law of Great Britain as a whole, the Library stocks most of the standard textbooks, usually in the current edition, and also a selection of texts on purely English law. Reports such as the "Weekly Law Reports", the "All England Law Reports", and the various series of "The Law Reports" are subscribed to, together with a complete set of Statutes. Such items as the "Encyclopedia of Forms and Precedents", "Halsbury's Laws of England", the "Journal of Planning Law", "Current Law", "Industrial Tribunal Reports", "British Tax Review", etc., are in constant use. Regarding overseas reports, since 1930 the Library has taken the "Commonwealth Law Reports" and the "New Zealand Law Reports" while there is an agreement with the Advocates and S.S.C. libraries that they subscribe to the "South African Law Reports" and the "Canadian Law Reports", which can be borrowed when required. As yet, no European nor United States reports are taken.

As well as the "Session Cases", the Library houses a set of the documents relating to these cases, known as "Session Papers". This is an invaluable collection of material, with a unique index for 1713-1820 compiled earlier this century by the Library staff. Many historians and research workers visit the Library to consult this collection which comprises some 2,500 volumes. The Library, too, contains the private collection of William Roughhead, the famous criminal trial authority of the 1920s and 1930s. A W.S. himself, he was the editor for a long time of the "Notable British Trials" series. His library is a unique assembly of some 400 titles, relating mainly to trials.

As is to be expected, a comprehensive range of items on Scots law, historical and modern, is kept, along with books on jurisprudence and Roman law, as well as the statutes of most of the Commonwealth countries. In the academic field the Library subscribes to such journals as "Modern Law Review", the "Law Quarterly Review" and the "Review of Contemporary Law", but it must be admitted that these are seldom referred to.

The Signet Library is much more than just a repository for books. Completed in 1821, it was designed by Robert Reid, the then King's Architect, and William Stark, and comprises two floors and basement. The Lower Library on the ground floor is a long hall, with gallery, enfladed with Doric columns. The hall is the working part of the Library and houses the volumes

referred to above along with others, mainly on topography and biography. But impressive as the Lower Library is, it is the Upper Library which causes gasps of admiration when first seen! A fine staircase with portraits of legal dignitaries including two by Raeburn and two by Allan Ramsay, leads to a lofty and spacious hall. Let that great bibliographer, Thomas Dibdin, who visited Edinburgh in 1837, describe the scene—

‘ spacious, ornamental, commodious, and replenished thickly with goodly and gorgeous tomes, the whole has an absolutely palatial air . . . the upper room is as thickly studded with pillars as the lower; but they are less heavy and fluted, of the Ionic order [rather Corinthian]. The whole effect of this upper room is exceedingly beautiful as well as novel, while the central cupola, filled with an allegorical painting by Stothard, adds to the lightness and splendour of the interior . . . long sets of the most costly volumes are here duly arranged to captivate the eye and warm the heart of the tasteful. A spirit of liberality has been evinced, such as I found nowhere to the south.’

Five years later another traveller, this time a German, Johann Kohl, visited Great Britain, and in his account of his trip to Edinburgh, he relates—

‘ The library and reading-rooms of the Edinburgh Advocates, and Writers to the Signet, are most enticing, the finest and most comfortable of the kind, and it must be a real enjoyment to be a bookworm here. We have all the elegance and convenience of a London club-house, and all the learning and abundance of a German library. I do not know that anywhere upon the Continent one can read books with truer relish than here.’

Well over a century since these lines were written, and over 150 years since it was built, the Upper Library still excites the imagination of those who prefer older styles of architecture to the more modern functional designs. Writers of the Signet regularly bring their friends from all over the world to admire it, while a guided tour of the Library is a recognised staff duty. Many of the books too are worth examining, whether or not one is a bibliophile. During the 19th century the Society made it its policy to acquire all the literature of note which was published, including items of European origin, and efforts were made to obtain many

volumes issued before the Library came into being. Thus, the 1890 edition of the Society's "History" could state proudly—

'In Scotland it is surpassed in size and value by only five libraries, viz., those of the faculty of advocates and the four universities . . . It may be safely said that no other professional community—whether legal, medical, or ecclesiastical—no scientific academy or society, in the whole of the United Kingdom can point to a collection of equal dimensions formed by similar means.'

The key phrase here is the last—the 82,000 volumes in 1890 'had been raised from first to last without any extraneous aid, by the annual income of the Society, the fees of intrants and the contributions of members'. This indeed was a remarkable feat.

During the first half of this century, it became no longer feasible to purchase most books published, although items on Scotland and Scottish affairs were assiduously procured. In the 1930s it became obvious that the Library could no longer keep up its role as one of the nation's best collections, at any rate with regard to modern titles, while after the Second World War income had fallen so low as to necessitate a complete review of library policy. This review made it plain that if the Library—both building and books—were to continue at all, then something drastic would have to be done. After various schemes had been discussed it was decided, albeit very reluctantly, to call in Sotheby & Co. to select those titles outwith the legal and Scottish sections, which would fetch the highest values if auctioned. This was duly carried out in 1959 and 1960 and some 14,000 books, plus about 3,000 pamphlets, were sold. The National Library of Scotland also received over 2,000 titles, and as the opportunity was taken to dispose of obsolete items, the total stock was reduced to about 115,000. Thus the Library lost a considerable number of its treasures, including its set of the original elephant folio edition of Audubon's "Birds of America" which Kohl, and others, had found such a delight. Although thus reduced in quantity and to some extent in quality, the Signet Library's general collection is still a fine one, especially its Scottish books; while there are many pleasant surprises in store for the bibliographer interested in out-of-the-way titles and rarer volumes. The resultant income has meant that practically the whole of the Library has been redecorated and recarpeted so that once again it is worthy of the appreciative comments made

during last century. It also means that the future of the Library and its remaining treasures are assured.

As one would expect, such an institution as the Signet Library has had its share of eminent librarians, although this was not the case during the first period of its history. The Library traces its origins back to 1722 when it was decided to purchase all Scottish law books in print together with the Acts of Parliament before and after the Union. However, it was not until 1778 that it was resolved to form a general library and, surprisingly, it was not until 1805 that the first librarian was appointed. This meant that by the early 19th century, by which time over 5,000 volumes had accumulated, the Library was in a state of disarray and it was not until one of the members of the Society, George Sandy, took it upon himself to reorganise the Library (which at this time was housed in very cramped accommodation) that it began to bear semblance to an organised collection of books. At the same time, Sandy compiled a comprehensive *catalogue raisonnée* which today is of great interest as it shows the state of the Library at the time.

Sandy had not long completed his work, however, when he received the offer of a more lucrative job elsewhere and he was succeeded by another W.S., Macvey Napier. By this time funds were available to buy books in quantity but Napier's main problem was space to house them. This was solved when the Society moved into its new premises in Parliament Square, beside St Giles Cathedral, in 1815. It was not long, however, before the new hall was filled with books, too, and it was with some relief that the Society learned that the Faculty of Advocates, who shared the building on the upper floor, had decided to occupy their own separate building nearby. Thus, in 1833, the Upper Library was purchased and the Society became the sole occupiers of the fine building already described. Napier now had ample space—which was just as well, for the stock grew to 40,000 titles (about eightfold) before his retiral in 1837.

Napier's successor was David Laing, in time to become perhaps one of Scotland's most illustrious literary scholars. Although his period of office coincided with a sharp decrease in the sum available for the purchase of books, if their number did not increase in quantity to the same degree, they increased in quality. Laing searched out many rare and precious volumes some of which he acquired for his own personal collection—which totalled over 12,000 volumes at his death—and others which were added to the Signet Library's stock. Laing began to work on an author catalogue in the 1860's and the first volume (A-L) was

issued in 1871; a second volume was partly completed by his death in 1878. Thus the first task of Laing's successor, Thomas G. Law, was to see this completed. The second volume (M-Z) was published in 1882 and a third volume comprising an author supplement to 1890 and a subject index to the whole, was issued in 1891. On Law's appointment in 1879, the Curators took the opportunity of reasserting that sufficient funds should be set aside to enable a comprehensive collection to be built up and maintained, and Law was instructed to fill any blanks he found, particularly in the history, philosophy, arts and sciences sections. This he did, so that by the time he died in 1904, the Library's stock stood at 105,000 compared with only 5,000 a century earlier.

These three librarians were eminent in their own right, apart from their connection with the Signet Library. Napier became editor of the "Encyclopaedia Britannica", at that time published in Edinburgh, and under his aegis the supplement to the sixth edition appeared in six volumes in 1824, and the seventh edition in twenty-one volumes from 1830-1842. In 1829 he became editor of the influential "Edinburgh Review", to which he had contributed many articles, and he continued this until his death in 1847. David Laing was, to quote the Society's "History", 'an illustrious scholar, who lived to edit some eighty separate works of Scottish literature and history, and obtained a European reputation as the *facile princeps* of Scottish Antiquaries'. He was Foreign Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and contributed to many of its volumes of "Transactions", while he was also connected with other major literary societies. T. G. Law, too, was concerned with Scottish history, being secretary of the Scottish History Society for a long period during which he was responsible for the issue of many volumes—a 'monumental contribution to the materials of Scottish history'. In 1898, Edinburgh University conferred on him the degree of LL.D. 'in recognition of his learned labours and indefatigable industry'. Thus, as the 1936 edition of the "History" says, 'it would be difficult to over-estimate the good fortune of the Society in having successively three such notable librarians'.

They were followed by a professional librarian rather than a scholar, John Minto. Minto was concerned with making the Library functional rather than being a mere storehouse and he introduced many improvements in its running, especially with regard to cataloguing. A new extension was opened at about the same time as he took office and he decided that all new books should be housed there, classified by Dewey. Hitherto, a system

of fixed location had been used and this still holds good for the older stock. Invaluable subject indexes were also begun by Minto. After the war, he found time to compile his well-known index to "Reference Books", published in 1929, with a supplement in 1931, while his "History of the Public Library Movement" (1932) has long remained a standard work.

Minto was succeeded in 1935 by Dr C. A. Malcolm. Malcolm was a return to the scholar/librarian, and he became the recognised authority on old Edinburgh, writing many articles on the City's history, particularly in "The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club". He was author of several histories of local interest, and he was secretary of the Stair Society, devoted to Scottish legal history, from its foundation in 1934 until his death in 1961. Dr Malcolm was succeeded by J. A. Christie, who had been for many years his lieutenant, and on his retirement in 1968 the present writer took office.

Within the last two years, it has been possible once again to purchase a limited selection of books of topical interest in addition to a large range of legal books. Some reorganisation of the catalogues and indexes has taken place, and such innovations as displays of new titles and a quarterly accessions bulletin, have been instituted. In 1969, a basement apartment was converted into a coffee room for the use of members and their staffs, and this has proved popular. The Society is encouraging the use of the Upper Hall for such functions as dinners, receptions, displays, etc., so that the Library is probably being used more than it ever was. As a corollary, these activities have stimulated a considerable interest in the books themselves and their potential, so that, after a period of enforced retrenchment, the Library is now reviviscent.

It is of interest to note that in November 1972, 250 years will have elapsed since the Society first decided to acquire and maintain a collection of books.

(This account of the Signet Library is substantially the article which appeared in "The Law Librarian", Vol. 2, No. 1, for April-July, 1971. Acknowledgement is made to the editor, and to the publishers, Messrs Sweet & Maxwell.)