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## John Knox's House and John Knox's Grave

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It is a curious fact that when Thomas M'Crie published the second edition of his *Life of John Knox* in 1813,<sup>1</sup> he regarded the site of John Knox's grave as traditional, but Knox's residence in the so-called "John Knox House" in the High Street of Edinburgh as an established fact.<sup>2</sup> For the site of the grave, he quotes Calderwood and Spottiswoode to the effect that Knox was buried "in the churchyard of St. Giles", but immediately adds, "some think that he was buried in one of the aisles of his own church";<sup>3</sup> whereas for the house he simply says, "The house which the reformer possessed is situated near the bottom of the High Street, a little below the Fountain Well. These three words are inscribed on the wall, ΘΕΟΣ, DEUS, GOD; and the proprietor has lately affixed

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition of *The Life of John Knox* was published on 18th November 1811 (see Thomas M'Crie (jr.), *Life of Thomas M'Crie, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1840), p. 168) and its preface is dated "November 14th 1811" (in the second edition). As far as we know, however, all copies of the first edition have the date of 1812 on the title page. The second edition was published in two volumes in March 1813 (see *Life of Thomas M'Crie*, p. 193). There was also an American printing of the first edition in 1813.

<sup>2</sup> The John Knox House is owned by the Church of Scotland and is open to the public. It used to be called "John Knox's House" but it was renamed in the later twentieth century as a result of the uncertainty over Knox's occupancy. The short period during which he might have occupied the house was from his return from St. Andrews in August 1572 until his death in November 1572.

<sup>3</sup> M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1812 edn.), p. 372; (1813 edn.), Vol. 2, p. 233; D. Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson and D. Laing (8 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842-9), Vol. 8, p. 200; J. Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland*, ed. M. Napier and M. Russell (3 vols., Spottiswoode Society, Edinburgh, 1847-1851), Vol. 2, p. 184.

the word KNOX in gilt letters.”<sup>4</sup> In more recent years, however, the authenticity of the traditional site of the grave has passed unchallenged;<sup>5</sup> whereas Knox’s supposed residence in the house has been vigorously disputed and widely rejected.

In this paper, we consider the traditions connected with these two sites. In commenting on certain other traditional sites, relating to Knox’s visit to Scotland in 1555-6, Jasper Ridley said, “Oral traditions may be accurate, or may have no basis at all in fact. The evidence is quite insufficient to justify us in accepting them as true, but there is no reason why we should reject them as fictitious.”<sup>6</sup> We are glad that Jasper Ridley did not indiscriminately reject all oral tradition, as some appear inclined to do, but nevertheless it seems extreme to reject oral tradition so entirely and in such sweeping terms as a means of proof. Oral tradition may ordinarily yield only likelihoods, but in some circumstances – for example where the path of tradition can be traced with reasonable confidence – it may give as good a proof as a document would have done; and after all it should not be forgotten that documents – even official records – have to be weighed, and can have spin, bias, carelessness, omission, error, falsehood, inconsistency and other qualities inimical to precise and accurate history.

The fact is that oral traditions need to be examined with the same common sense, research, and imagination used in the study of other historical sources. Oral tradition is one way in which interesting facts may be preserved for considerable periods of time, and the historian must be able to use this potential source of information. We shall see that both the main writers who argued against Knox’s occupancy of the John Knox House showed a regrettably superficial and unrealistic approach to oral tradition.

Our examination of the oral tradition connected with Knox’s supposed occupancy of the John Knox House shows, on the one hand, that there seems to be no particular reason to doubt the tradition, and, on the other hand, that the tradition receives a measure of

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<sup>4</sup> M’Crie, *The Life of John Knox* (1813 edn.), Vol. 2, p. 218. The comment on the name “Knox” was omitted in the third edition of 1814.

<sup>5</sup> About the beginning of 2013, a plaque was added to the small stone marking the traditional site of the grave with the words, “The above stone marks the approximate site of the burial in St Giles Churchyard of John Knox, the great Scottish divine, who died 24 Nov. 1572”. See *The Bulwark*, October-December 2013, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> J. Ridley, *John Knox* (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 230-1.

support from certain historical statements of the early seventeenth century. We are not claiming a proof, but we think that the balance of probabilities is strongly on the side of the tradition.

## I. JOHN KNOX'S GRAVE

The traditional site of John Knox's grave is in Parliament Square in Edinburgh, about twenty yards from St. Giles' Church. Parliament Square and the old Parliament buildings are on the site of what used to be St. Giles' churchyard. The authorities for the location of Knox's grave in St. Giles' churchyard are Calderwood and Spottiswoode writing in the 1620s and 1630s; David Buchanan's statement in 1644 that Knox was "interred at St. Giles, without



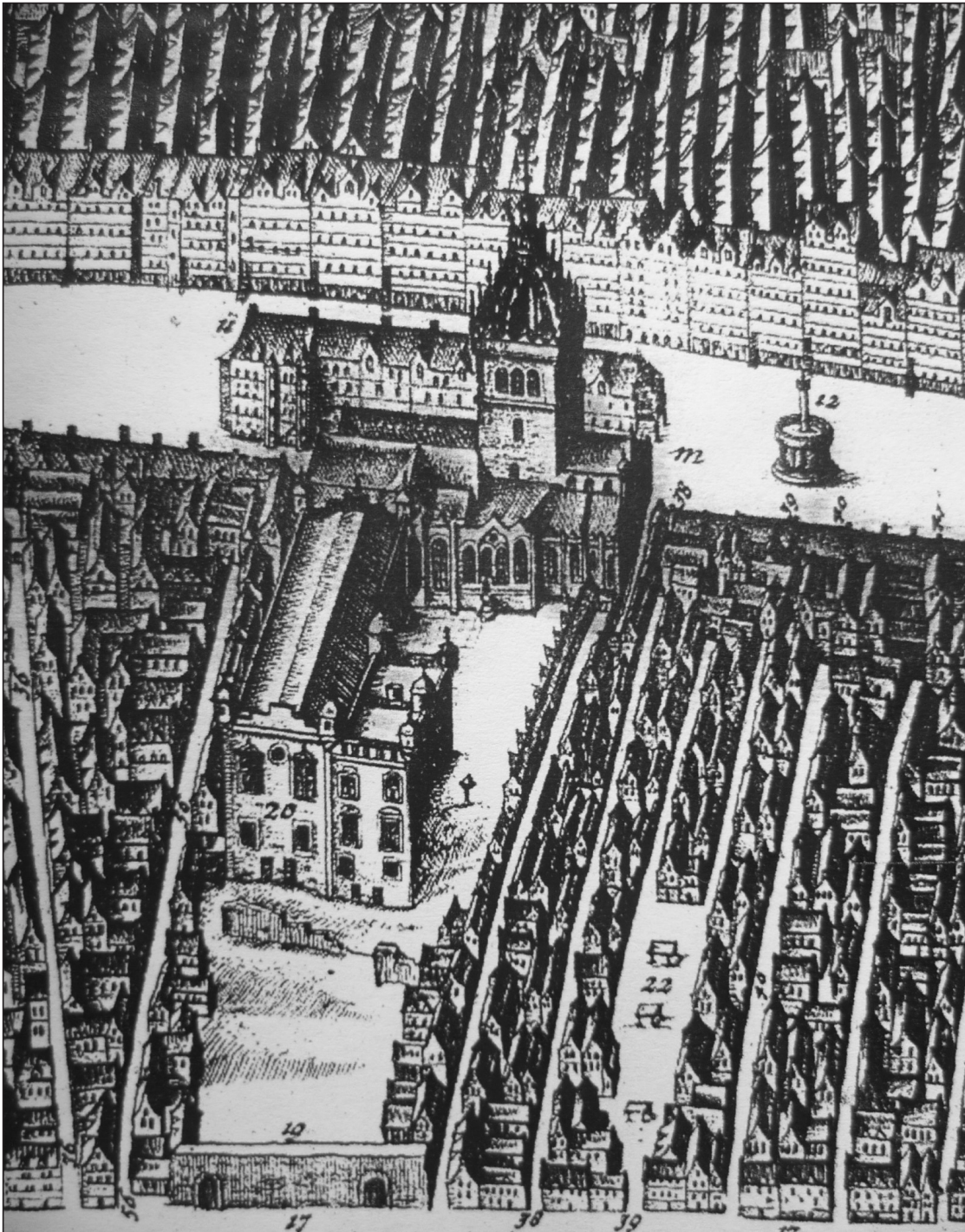
*The marker for the traditional site of John Knox's grave near St. Giles' Church.*

[Photo by Kim Traynor, Wikimedia Commons]

the church";<sup>7</sup> and the tradition noted by David Laing in the 1850s: "there is reason to believe that [the grave] was nearly in a line with the entrance to the south transept, a little to the west of the base of Charles the Second's equestrian statue, in the Parliament Close."<sup>8</sup> St. Giles' churchyard was obliterated between 1632 and 1639 when Parliament House and other buildings were erected on the site; while the equestrian statue of Charles II was set up in 1685.

<sup>7</sup> John Knox, *Historie of the Reformation of the Church of Scotland*, ed. David Buchanan (London, 1644), unpaginated "Life of John Knox". Buchanan was dependent on Spottiswoode's *History* (then in manuscript) for some of his information (see D. Hay Fleming, *Critical Reviews* (London, 1912), pp. 212-3), but his account of Knox's burying-place may be independent.

<sup>8</sup> D. Laing (ed.), *Registrum Cartarum Ecclesie Sancti Egidii de Edinburgh* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1859), p. l; D. Laing (ed.), *Works of John Knox* (6 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1846-64), Vol. 6, p. lii. Unfortunately David Laing does not tell us his grounds for such a precise assertion. M'Crie's mention of an alternative site of burial shows that oral tradition was not unanimous on the matter.



*View of the back of St. Giles' Church in 1647 from James Gordon of Rothiemay's map.*  
 [Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland]

One of the enactments of the *First Book of Discipline* of 1560 was that “In respect of divers inconveniences we think it neither seemly that the Kirk appointed to preaching and ministration of the Sacraments shall be made a place of burial, but that some other secret and convenient place, lying in the most free air, be appointed for that use, which place ought to

be walled and fenced about and kept for that use only”.<sup>9</sup> This enactment was largely ignored, but Knox followed it, at least to the extent that he was buried outside St. Giles rather than in the church.<sup>10</sup> It is supposed that he was buried beside his first wife, Marjory Bowes, who had died in December 1560.

The burial of such a prominent person outside the church was unusual at the time, which makes it uncertain what sort of grave-marker would have been used. That some grave-marker must have been employed is likely because, as Angus Graham observes, one can hardly operate a graveyard without keeping a record of where people have been buried.<sup>11</sup> The probability is that Knox had a recumbent slab-stone on his grave of the sort that was commonly used inside churches at the time. An example of such a stone, dating from 1586, can be seen in the Dreghorn Old Cemetery in Ayrshire.<sup>12</sup> In September 1582, George Buchanan was buried in the Greyfriars cemetery in Edinburgh. From the Edinburgh Council minutes of 3rd December 1701 it would appear that a flat stone was placed on his grave: “The Council being informed that the through-stone of the deceased Mr. George Buchanan lies sunk under the ground of Greyfriars; therefore they appoint the Chamberlain to cause raise the same and clear the inscription thereupon so as the same may be legible.” If there ever had been any inscription on this stone, it seems to have been indecipherable by 1701.<sup>13</sup>

The question then arises as to what might have happened to Knox's slab-stone. Over the years it too would have tended to become covered in grass and moss and eventually buried. If it was already buried by the 1630s, it might still be in existence under the tarmac of Parliament

<sup>9</sup> J. K. Cameron (ed.), *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> In Aberdeen, for example, the first Protestant minister Adam Heriot (d. 1574); his wife Effemia Schevez (d. 1568); a prominent burgess and early Protestant Thomas Branche (d. 1574); the Provost of Aberdeen Thomas Menzies (d. 1576); the Principal of King's College, Alexander Arbuthnot (d. 1583); and the town clerk John Kennedy (d. 1589), were all buried in St. Nicholas' Church.

<sup>11</sup> Angus Graham, “Headstones in Post-Reformation Scotland”, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 91 (1957-8), pp. 1-9, (see p. 5).

<sup>12</sup> A picture of the Dreghorn stone appears on the Wikipedia entry for “Scottish gravestones”. Surviving Scottish memorial stones of any sort dating between 1560 and 1600 are rare, and recumbent slabs especially so. Without spending time counting, we doubt that there are more than a hundred in existence.

<sup>13</sup> H. Armet (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1689-1701* (Edinburgh, 1962), pp. 294-5. See the discussion in D. Laing's introduction to J. Brown, *The Epitaphs and Monumental Inscriptions in Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. xxii-xxvi; P. Hume Brown, *George Buchanan* (Edinburgh, 1890), pp. 353-4.

Square; but on the other hand the tradition for the exact location of Knox's would be so much the weaker as having to rely on oral transmission from an earlier date. If on the other hand the stone was still visible up to the 1630s, then it was probably used for building material at that time.<sup>14</sup> Those who revered Knox's memory may have made an effort to preserve the knowledge of his burying place (perhaps with reference to the nearby entrance to the south transept of St. Giles), and this knowledge may have been retained for another fifty years until 1685 when the setting up of the equestrian statue provided an even more convenient way of describing the grave's location. If this is correct, then the marker that David Laing placed on the supposed site of the grave might indeed be near the actual burying place.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the steps in this argument are uncertain, however, and Knox's grave may well be elsewhere in the St. Giles' cemetery. Some of the bodies in the cemetery were disinterred in 1630s and re-buried in Greyfriars cemetery.<sup>16</sup> If Knox's original grave was further away from St. Giles than the traditional site, then it is even possible that his body was among these.

## II. JOHN KNOX'S HOUSE

Whatever the uncertainties concerning Knox's burying-place, Thomas M'Crie had no doubts concerning the identity of the house in which Knox lived at the end of his life; and this certainty continued throughout the nineteenth century until it was fiercely assaulted<sup>17</sup> in the 1890s by two prominent Edinburgh antiquarians of the surname of Miller.<sup>18</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> Builders were ruthless, both before and after the Reformation. In St. Andrews one sculptured stone was rescued from the gates of the harbour and another from a pigsty; see D. Hay Fleming, *St. Andrews Cathedral Museum* (Edinburgh, 1931), p. xv.

<sup>15</sup> See G. Goudie, *David Laing, LL.D.* (Edinburgh, 1913), p. 110. The marker seems to have been placed about 1876.

<sup>16</sup> R. Richardson, "The History of Parliament Square", *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 3 (1910), pp. 207-242 (p. 220).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Guthrie described those assailing the John Knox House as "iconoclasts fiercer even than that 'rascal multitude'" mentioned by John Knox. *The Scotsman*, 10th March 1891, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Miller was a surgeon and had died by 1899. He wrote several articles for the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS)*, including two important papers in 1886 on the Old Tolbooth and on the Mercat Cross of Edinburgh. Robert Miller was the Lord Dean of Guild from 1890 to 1898. In 1895 he published *The Edinburgh Dean of Guild Court: A Manual of History and Procedure* and in 1896 *The Municipal Buildings of Edinburgh*.

Millers were answered by Sir Daniel Wilson<sup>19</sup> and Charles J. Guthrie (later Lord Guthrie).<sup>20</sup> Guthrie had the last word on the subject at the time,<sup>21</sup> but opinion has been divided ever since.<sup>22</sup> Before considering the Millers' arguments, we want to discuss the strength of the tradition that they were attacking, and to assess how much weight should be attributed to it.

## 1. The tradition

The controversy generated by the Millers brought to light four "witnesses" to the tradition concerning the John Knox House, dating from the turn of the eighteenth century. The earliest of these was the artist David Allan (1744-1796). His picture, "View of the High Street of Edinburgh from the East, 1793", shows the John Knox House in the foreground with a sculptured figure, looking like John Knox, on the wall and a bookshop called "Knox the Bookseller's" on the ground floor. The name of the bookseller is puzzling as there seems to be no other reference to a bookshop of this name. By itself, the picture might be inconclusive, but in connection with the other evidence it shows that the association of the house with John Knox was already fixed in the public mind by the 1790s.

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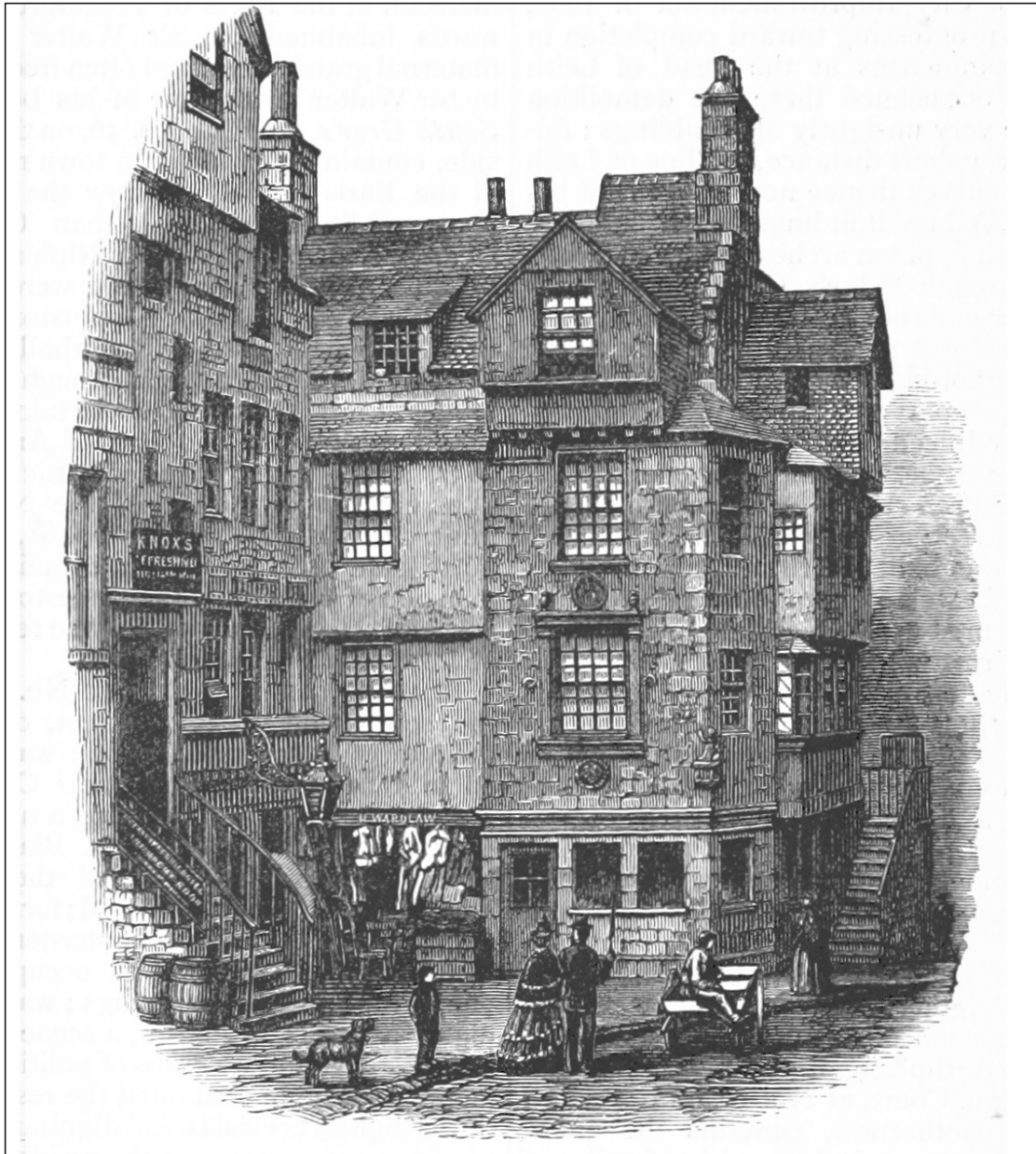
An impressive portrait of him by John Dick Bowie can be viewed online. He had died by 1905. We are not aware of any connection between the two men.

<sup>19</sup> For Sir Daniel Wilson (1816-1892), see his entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*; H. Hannah, "Sir Daniel Wilson: the Man and his Work", *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 17 (1930), pp. 1-16.

<sup>20</sup> Charles J. Guthrie (1849-1920) was the son of the Free Church minister Thomas Guthrie. In 1898 he published an edition of Knox's *History of the Reformation*. He became a Court of Session judge in 1907.

<sup>21</sup> The main publications in the 1890s dispute were as follows: P. Miller, "John Knox and his Manse", *PSAS*, Vol. 25 (1891), pp. 138-154; D. Wilson, "Supplementary notes on John Knox's House, Netherbow, Edinburgh", *PSAS*, Vol. 25 (1891), pp. 154-162; C. J. Guthrie, "Is 'John Knox's House' entitled to the name?", *PSAS*, Vol. 25 (1891), pp. 333-348; P. Miller, "Supplementary notes on John Knox's House", *PSAS*, Vol. 27 (1893), pp. 406-411; P. Hume Brown, *John Knox* (2 vols., London, 1895), Vol. 2, pp. 315-319; C. J. Guthrie, "John Knox's House, Edinburgh: the property of the Free Church of Scotland", *Free Church Monthly*, September 1896 (not seen); R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1898); C. J. Guthrie, *John Knox and John Knox's House* (Edinburgh, 1898), pp. 42-52; R. Miller, "Where did John Knox live in Edinburgh? And the legend of 'John Knox's House'", *PSAS*, Vol. 33 (1899), pp. 80-115; and C. J. Guthrie, "The traditional belief in John Knox's House at the Netherbow vindicated", *PSAS*, Vol. 33 (1899), pp. 249-273. Miller's 1899 paper is an abridgement of his 1898 book.

<sup>22</sup> Since the 1890s, the main published discussions have been H. Cowan, *John Knox: The Hero of the Scottish Reformation* (New York, 1905), pp. 383-90; Donald Smith, *John Knox House: Gateway to Edinburgh's Old Town* (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 41-47. The tradition of



*John Knox House (from Paterson's Guide to Edinburgh, 1875).*

The second witness was an English travel writer, the Honourable Mrs. Sarah Murray (1744-1811), who visited Scotland in 1796 and published her guide in 1799.<sup>23</sup> In her description of Edinburgh High Street

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Knox's occupancy of the John Knox House was rejected by Gordon Donaldson, *All the Queen's Men* (New York, 1983), p. 125, and by the current Wikipedia entry for the house, but has been accepted by most of Knox's biographers, see e.g. Lord Eustace Percy, *John Knox* (2nd edn., London, 1964), p. 336; Ridley, *John Knox*, p. 511; W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox* (New York, 1974), p. 281; J. Wilkinson, *The Medical History of the Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox* (Edinburgh, 2001), p. 106; J. Dawson, *John Knox* (Yale University Press, 2015), p. 306.

<sup>23</sup> For biographical information on Mrs. Murray, see her entry in *ODNB*.



she makes a passing reference to the John Knox House: “As the street narrows to the left is a tottering bow window whence Knox thundered his addresses to the people.”<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Murray must simply have been relating what she had been told, and her account shows that the tradition (with some of its accretions which were to be triumphantly exposed by the Millers) was already in full swing by the 1790s.

The third witness was the Edinburgh printer, John Stark. In 1805 he published a Scottish biographical dictionary, *Biographia Scotica*, and in 1806 he printed the second edition of the *Gazetteer of Scotland*. From 1805 to 1807 he was printing near the Netherbow, just down the High Street from the John Knox House. In 1806 he published his *Picture of Edinburgh*, dedicated to the Principal and Professors of Edinburgh University. Guthrie described the work as “a very accurate and careful book” and it went through numerous editions.<sup>25</sup> The reference to the John Knox House is as follows:

Among the antiquities of Edinburgh may be mentioned the house of the great Scottish reformer John Knox. It stands on the north side of the foot of the High Street, and, projecting into the street, reduces it nearly one half of its width. On the front to the west is a figure in *alto relievo*, pointing up with its finger to a radiated stone



*Statue of Moses on the John Knox House.*

[Photo by Tony Hisgett, Wikimedia Commons]

<sup>24</sup> Hon. Mrs. Murray, *A Companion and Useful Guide to the Beauties of Scotland* (London, 1799), p. 117. Her visit was in 1796 (*ibid.*, p. 42) rather than 1784 as several writers have asserted.

<sup>25</sup> Guthrie, “The traditional belief in John Knox’s House at the Netherbow vindicated”, p. 264.

on which is sculptured the name of the Divinity in three different languages: ΘΕΟΣ, DEUS, GOD. Whether the figure is meant to represent the reformer himself, or not, is not known; but whoever it is, he seems to have been hardly used, part of the stone on which it is executed, being broken off either by accident or design. The edifice itself is one of the oldest stone houses in Edinburgh. As in the course of the improvements of the city this building will in a few years perhaps be removed, it is to be wished that the sculptured stones could be preserved in memory of a man, who, whatever were his faults, by his bold eloquence and undaunted conduct, pulled down the fabric of a superstition which had shackled the mind for ages.<sup>26</sup>

Together, these three witnesses show that the tradition that Knox had lived in the John Knox House was well established by the 1790s, and appears, indeed, to have been a universally accepted fact. For such a situation to have prevailed, the tradition, one would think, must have dated back at least sixty years to the 1730s, to allow anyone who could remember a time before its rise to have passed off the scene. The question has been asked as to why the tradition was not recorded before the 1790s. This is difficult to answer because a book may omit to say something for innumerable reasons. The three main histories of Edinburgh prior to the 1790s were those of William Maitland,<sup>27</sup> Hugo Arnot,<sup>28</sup> and Alexander Kincaid.<sup>29</sup> None of the three had any sympathy for John Knox, and a glance through Arnot's work and Kincaid's shows that Knox's occupancy of an old house was not the sort of thing that they were describing. Of the three, Maitland had the greatest antiquarian interest, but though he discussed the surroundings of the Netherbow, for some reason he made no mention of the statue on the John Knox House though it was certainly in existence.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> J. Stark, *Picture of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1806), pp. 102-3.

<sup>27</sup> W. Maitland, *History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1753). For Maitland (c. 1693-1757), see his entry in *ODNB*.

<sup>28</sup> H. Arnot, *History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1779). For Arnot (1749-1786), see his entry in *ODNB*.

<sup>29</sup> A. Kincaid, *History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1787). Kincaid's father, also Alexander (1710-1777), was a successful printer and briefly Lord Provost of Edinburgh; see the father's entry in *ODNB*. Another guide to Edinburgh, *The Traveller's Companion through the City of Edinburgh and Suburbs* (Edinburgh, 1794) was an abridgment of Kincaid's *History*.

<sup>30</sup> Maitland, *History of Edinburgh*, p. 169. Arnot and Kincaid were more concerned to boast about the "improvements" than to dwell on the antiquities of Edinburgh.



*Cardinal Beaton's House (from Wilson's Reminiscences of Old Edinburgh, 1878).*

Perhaps he shared the misapprehension that it was a statue of Knox and preferred to ignore it.

Furthermore, by way of comparison, none of the three histories refer to the similar "tradition" concerning Cardinal Beaton's house. This was a building on the corner of Blackfriars Wynd and the Cowgate that

was traditionally connected with Cardinal David Beaton and which was demolished in 1867. Maitland mentions the house but not the “tradition”, while the other two are completely silent, as was Stark.<sup>31</sup> Writing in 1825, Robert Chambers says that “All the information respecting Cardinal Beaton’s house is very uncertain, being, indeed, only *traditionary*. If it really has been, as is generally supposed, the abode of Cardinal Beaton, we are to suppose it a place canonized by the notice of Scottish history. . . . It is curious to see a house originally so splendid and so dignified, thus decayed and degraded.”<sup>32</sup>

The idea that the association of Cardinal Beaton with the house was only traditional continued well into the twentieth century. Henry Kerr says, “So far as records go we have no authority to say that this was the residence of the Cardinal, but as he was the nephew of the builder it is more than likely that he did occupy the house now and then”.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the entry in the RCAMS publication, *The City of Edinburgh*, says, “According to tradition, Archbishop Beaton was succeeded in the ownership of the house by his nephew, the Cardinal”.<sup>34</sup> But the very thing that is lacking with the John Knox House is available for Cardinal Beaton’s house, namely, near-contemporary evidence that the traditional occupant did in fact live there. In 1561/2, sixteen years after his death, the *Diurnal* refers to the building on Blackfriars Wynd as “the Cardinal’s lodging”.<sup>35</sup> This is evidently how it was known at the time to people in Edinburgh. Such a name, within sixteen years of his death, proves beyond reasonable doubt that Cardinal Beaton used to reside there. His connection with the house was not “traditional” at all; it was a historical

<sup>31</sup> Maitland: “the archiepiscopal palace belonging to the See of St Andrews, part whereof is still to be seen”, *History of Edinburgh*, p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1825), Vol. 1, pp. 211-5 (pp. 213-4).

<sup>33</sup> H. F. Kerr, “Cardinal Beaton’s Palace: Blackfriars’ Wynd”, *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 24 (1942), pp. 239-246 (pp. 241-2).

<sup>34</sup> Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland (RCAMS), *The City of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1951), p. 128. Strangely, this publication gives the reference to the *Diurnal* (see next footnote) without drawing from it the obvious conclusion.

<sup>35</sup> “And upon the ninth day of February at even, the Queen’s Grace and the remanent [other] lords came up in an honourable manner from the Palace of Holyrood to the Cardinal’s lodging in the Blackfriars Wynd, which was prepared and hung most honourable; and there Her Highness supped and the rest with her”; T. Thomson (ed.), *Diurnal of Remarkable Occurrents* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1833), p. 71. See also R. Adam, *Edinburgh Records: The Burgh Accounts* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1899), Vol. 2, p. 153 (recording that in 1561 a “great joist” was removed from Cardinal Beaton’s lodging to be used in the building of John Knox’s study).

fact of virtual certainty.<sup>36</sup> In any event, the silence of these three histories with regard to Beaton's house shows that nothing can be concluded from their similar silence with regard to the John Knox House.

## 2. The Millers

Before coming to the fourth witness, we want to discuss the hostile attitude of the two Millers to the tradition as we have described it thus far. Both of them were unaware of David Allan and of Mrs. Murray, so Stark was the earliest source for the tradition that they knew of. In their examination of the Edinburgh records, they had found evidence that Knox spent most of his ministerial life in other manses than the John Knox House, and thus the various popular accretions to the tradition appeared to them as so many ignorant statements to be opposed and exploded.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore Robert Miller certainly – and Peter Miller possibly – felt a hostility towards the Free Church of Scotland which owned the John Knox House and had opened it to the public.<sup>38</sup> Robert Miller believed that the Free Church was profiting from what was virtually a deception. The unfortunate result of this was that the Millers allowed a bitterness and sarcasm into their thinking and writing which hindered them from approaching the tradition with the necessary historical detachment.

Both the Millers – mistakenly, and quite unreasonably we think – attributed the rise of the tradition to Stark. Peter Miller at first declined to investigate its origin: “When and by what authority the tradition was first established, it may now serve no useful purpose to enquire, but

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<sup>36</sup> This is how it is taken by M. H. B. Sanderson, *Cardinal of Scotland: David Beaton, c. 1494-1546* (Edinburgh, 1986), p. 131. In Appendix 2, Sanderson gives Beaton's itinerary from 1524-1546, showing the considerable time that he spent in Edinburgh. His place of residence there was large enough to incorporate a prison cell; see R. K. Hannay (ed.), *Rentale Sancti Andree* (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1913), p. 143. Apparently the title-deeds do not mention Cardinal Beaton's occupancy of the house; but the correct conclusion to be drawn from this is, not that it is uncertain whether he lived there, but that no absolute reliance can be placed on title-deeds for establishing the occupancy even of famous people; see J. Geddie, “Sculptured stones of the ‘Royal Mile’: II”, *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 15 (1927), pp. 99-134 (pp. 107-8).

<sup>37</sup> For several of the erroneous accretions, together with their exposure, see Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, Vol. 1, pp. 240-3; Thomas M'Crie junior's note in M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1855 edn.), pp. 473-4; R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, pp. 122-125.

<sup>38</sup> See Smith, *John Knox House*, p. 46. Much of the bad feeling arose from the late-nineteenth-century campaign for the disestablishment of the Church of Scotland, in which the Free Church played a prominent part.

judging from what is known with certainty respecting it, the legend is not a very old one, and cannot be traced to an earlier date than the beginning of the present century.” Without further discussion, however, he soon became convinced that what he was confronting was “a pious belief in a local tradition that only came into existence some eighty years ago”.<sup>39</sup> As his opponent Charles Guthrie commented, this amounted almost to a charge that Stark had invented the tradition.<sup>40</sup> Robert Miller was even more emphatic that the tradition, or “legend” as he preferred to call it, had originated with Stark. “A story was started about the beginning of the century – it would seem on no evidence whatever – that Knox lived in this house at the Netherbow.” “No one would ever have dreamt that [Knox] would go to Mosman’s [i.e. the John Knox House] . . . had it not been for the one statement made in 1806 in such an unpretending fashion, and on no authority, by the compiler of a popular guide-book to Edinburgh.”<sup>41</sup>

The behaviour of the Millers in this matter was strange. They were asserting dogmatically, and in provocative language, that the tradition had begun with Stark, but they had no proof for their assertion beyond the fact that they were not aware of any reference earlier than Stark. They were highly critical of others for making assertions without historical proof, but they were doing exactly the same thing themselves with regard to Stark. As Guthrie observed, the Millers were in fact inventing a mini-legend of their own, namely that the tradition of John Knox’s occupancy of the house had been started about 1806.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, even common sense should have told the Millers that popular guide-books cannot reasonably be expected to give authority for their statements, and neither do they usually invent them.

<sup>39</sup> P. Miller, “John Knox and his Manse”, pp. 139, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Guthrie, “Is ‘John Knox’s House’ entitled to the name?”, pp. 346-7.

<sup>41</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, pp. 130, 151. “The foregoing discussion has shown that there was never any foundation for the statement that Knox lived at the Netherbow. It has shown further that the legend attached to the present house is an invention altogether of the present century, and that Stark, who first gave it currency in print, cannot be held responsible for its popular and varying forms” (ibid., pp. 151-2). “May one not surmise that here we have tracked the legend home to its lair, and that either Stark or Stark’s unknown informant had seen the name ‘John Knox’ in some title-deeds of property in this locality, and was led immediately to the conclusion that no John Knox could be of importance except one” (ibid., pp. 157).

<sup>42</sup> Guthrie, “The traditional belief in John Knox’s House at the Netherbow vindicated”, p. 262.

They simply relate current traditions.<sup>43</sup> Thus the natural assumption was, not that Stark was the inventor of the tradition, but that he was a witness to what was widely believed in Edinburgh in his day. If the Millers were serious about proposing Stark as the inventor of the tradition, they needed to look through his writings to find other examples of his supposed “inventiveness”. This they made no attempt to do. Peter Miller was dead by then, but one feels that it must have been a fitting embarrassment for Robert Miller when a newspaper correspondent in 1899 drew attention to Mrs. Murray’s book of 1799 and Miller’s claim about Stark was refuted.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Thomas M’Crie

We come now to the fourth witness, the eminent Church historian Thomas M’Crie (1772-1835), whose 1813 “testimony” concerning the John Knox House has already been given in the opening paragraph of this paper. We saw there that M’Crie distinguished between the strength of evidence for Knox’s burying place, which he regarded as somewhat uncertain, and the evidence for Knox’s occupancy of the John Knox House, which he regarded as an established fact.<sup>45</sup> M’Crie had been a student at Edinburgh University from 1788 to 1791 and had been living in Edinburgh as a minister since 1796. His special interest in Knox dated from about 1800.<sup>46</sup>

How did M’Crie come to the view that Knox had lived in the John Knox House? Peter Miller does not mention M’Crie at all, and Robert Miller disregards him as an independent witness to the tradition,

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<sup>43</sup> This was pointed out by the Chairman, J. R. Findlay, at the conclusion of Guthrie’s paper to the Society of Antiquaries in March 1891: “The Chairman said that it seemed to him that if the tradition did not represent the fact there was no special interest or reason for anyone inventing it, and as for Stark, he probably merely reported what was current at the time.” *The Scotsman*, 10th March 1891, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> See Guthrie, “The traditional belief in John Knox’s House at the Netherbow vindicated”, pp. 273-4.

<sup>45</sup> For another tradition which M’Crie accepted, see his reference to Knox’s catechising at a chapel in Longniddry in 1546-7. “The memory of this,” he says, “has been preserved by tradition, and the chapel, the ruins of which are still apparent, is popularly called John Knox’s kirk”; M’Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1812 edn.), p. 35. M’Crie gives his sources as George Chalmers, *Caledonia*, Vol. 2, p. 526 (this second volume had appeared in 1810), and Knox’s *History of the Reformation* (see W. Croft Dickinson (ed.), *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland* (2 vols., London, 1949), Vol. 1, p. 82).

<sup>46</sup> *Life of Thomas M’Crie*, pp. 161-3. In September 1802 M’Crie was the probable translator for the *Christian Magazine* of a Latin account of Knox’s last days; see Knox, *Works*, pp. 645-660. We quote from this translation below.

and assumes, astonishingly, that M'Crië had encountered the tradition in Stark's "popular guidebook" and had incorporated it without enquiry into his biography of Knox.<sup>47</sup> Robert Miller seems to have had little idea of the care and research that went into M'Crië's *Life of Knox*. M'Crië may indeed have looked at Stark's book – Guthrie queries this,<sup>48</sup> but M'Crië was certainly a voracious reader – but in any case we have seen that the tradition of Knox's occupancy of the house was current in Edinburgh, and doubtless M'Crië was aware of this fact.

The significant point about M'Crië, however, is that he was part of the Secession tradition which stretched back to the 1730s in Edinburgh, and which linked with the earlier Covenanting tradition of the seventeenth century. There was an unbroken heritage of Edinburgh Protestantism going back to Knox's time, and the representatives of this heritage in the early nineteenth century were the very people who were likely to have known and cared where Knox lived.<sup>49</sup> M'Crië, therefore, may well have had much stronger evidence regarding the John Knox House than we are now aware of.

For an illustrative example of tradition, while the present writer was working on this paper a friend happened to show him how Archibald Cook, the Free Church minister of Daviot, used to dance in the pulpit when he became excited in preaching. Archibald Cook died in 1865, one hundred and fifty years ago; but the demonstrator had his information from the son of a member of Cook's congregation, who had it from his father. The present writer's children who also saw the demonstration may possibly be alive and may remember it in seventy years time, which would be two hundred and twenty years after Cook's death, or about the interval between Knox and M'Crië. Information preserved in this way is not really "traditional" in the common sense of the word, but is simply knowledge preserved by oral transmission. Such knowledge, particularly

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<sup>47</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 151. Admittedly M'Crië may appear, at first sight, to have done just this in the case of the Longniddry tradition noted above, but (i) Chalmers' *Caledonia* was not a "popular guidebook"; (ii) M'Crië had explicitly stated there that he was relying on tradition, and had given the reference to Chalmers' *Caledonia*; and (iii) a comparison between what M'Crië wrote and what was in his sources makes it virtually certain that he had been out to Longniddry to check the tradition for himself.

<sup>48</sup> Guthrie, "The traditional belief in John Knox's House at the Netherbow vindicated", p. 264.

<sup>49</sup> The same observation is made in Guthrie, *John Knox and John Knox's House*, p. 52.



when it is of a simple visual sort, can easily be transmitted for over two hundred years.<sup>50</sup>

What perhaps supports the idea that M'Crie had some source of knowledge beyond the general tradition is that when he added his footnote on the John Knox House to the second edition of his book, he attached it, not to his first reference to Knox's manse in Edinburgh, where it would certainly have been incorrect, but to his account of Knox's last days.<sup>51</sup> We have seen from Mrs. Murray that the general tradition made no such distinction and supposed that Knox had occupied the John Knox House during an earlier part of his ministry in Edinburgh.<sup>52</sup> M'Crie's accuracy in this matter may be fortuitous, but it rather suggests that he had more specific information than just the general tradition that John Knox had lived in the house at some point. He seems particularly to have connected the house with the final period of Knox's life.

#### **4. The Millers' arguments**

We want now to consider the arguments put forward by the Millers against Knox's occupancy of the John Knox House. Several of the things that we have to say in response are borrowed from the work of Guthrie, Cowan, and Donald Smith.

##### ***(i) Mossman's occupation of the house***

The first and most important argument against Knox's occupancy of the John Knox House was that the house was owned by the Roman Catholic jeweller James Mossman and that probably Mossman himself was

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that the memory of Knox's other Edinburgh manses seems to have been quickly lost, though his stays in them had been much longer. The other manses were hidden away up closes, according to the Millers, and had no interesting public events associated with them. The John Knox House, on the other hand, is one of the most prominent and unmistakable buildings on the High Street (see, for example, Gordon of Rothiemay's map of 1647) and was (probably) where Knox was seen for the last time by his congregation. This would be a natural memory to pass on to one's grandchildren; and a simple fact that they could easily retain.

<sup>51</sup> M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1813 edn.), Vol. 2, pp. 45, 218.

<sup>52</sup> As we have mentioned (see fn. 37 above), both Robert Chambers and the younger Thomas M'Crie fell into the same error as Mrs. Murray – an interesting example of the unreliability of tradition with regard to details. Simple broad facts may be accurately transmitted but details tend to get garbled, even in a single iteration of the tradition. M'Crie's *Life of Knox* must have led to a surge of interest in the John Knox House from 1811 onwards, and not surprisingly the oak-panelled room was soon identified with the “warm study of deals” provided for Knox by the Council in October 1561, the existence of which M'Crie had brought to light, *Life of Knox* (1812 edn.), p. 482. This misleading “confirmation” must have completely displaced any oral tradition that had existed up to that time.

occupying the house from the time of Knox's return to Edinburgh at the end of August 1572 until Knox's death in November of that year. A truce or "abstinence" had been agreed between the warring parties at the end of July which expressly provided that "by this mean, all men, or their servants, without fear of men of war or violence, may freely enter, and dwell in their own houses, as shall please them, during the said truce or abstinence".<sup>53</sup> Surely, it is argued, even if Mossman had been in Edinburgh Castle before that time, he would have returned to his house like everyone else at the beginning of August. This consideration was forcefully urged by Robert Miller.<sup>54</sup>

Since the Millers' day, however, the Register of the Privy Seal for that period has been catalogued and published; and among the entries are two of special relevance for us. The first is one on 24th April 1572 which records the appointment of Thomas Acheson as

"Master Assayer of his grace's cunye [coin] and money" in succession to James Mossman, goldsmith and burgess of Edinburgh, who has not only "ceased from the said office but also has conveyed himself within the Castle of Edinburgh and there remains with our sovereign lord's rebels and declared traitors, devising and forging false and counterfeit cunye within the same."<sup>55</sup>

Thus Mossman had definitely entered Edinburgh Castle by April 1572, a fact which was unknown in the 1890s. The second entry, on 29th June 1572, records that Mossman had already been put to the horn (outlawed) and that the gift of the escheat of his goods was now granted to Captain Walter Aikman, a member of the besieging army.<sup>56</sup>

The terms of the truce a month later were generous, and it seems likely that had Mossman given up coining and quietly returned to his

<sup>53</sup> Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 3, p. 217; *Diurnal of Remarkable Occurrents*, ed. T. Thomson (Bannatyne Society, 1833), p. 310.

<sup>54</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, pp. 142-3. For details of Mossman's association with the house, see Smith, *John Knox House*, *passim*, building on earlier work of the Millers. Since many of the things that we say in this paper about the Millers are negative, perhaps we should state here that we regard their uncovering of Mossman's link with the John Knox House as work of great value.

<sup>55</sup> G. Donaldson (ed.), *Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland, 1567-1574* (Edinburgh, 1963), Vol. 6, p. 302, no. 1576, 24th April 1572.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 316, no. 1660, 29th June 1572. Aikman would not, of course, have been able to occupy the John Knox House at that stage because it was inside the town that he was besieging. Through his first marriage in 1556, Mossman also owned at least five other properties in Edinburgh; see Smith, *John Knox House*, pp. 12, 14-15, 28.

house he would have had a good case for re-possessing it. This, however, is not what happened. Instead, the coining continued unabated in the Castle, and even on 1st August, when the abstinence had hardly started, Regent Mar was already complaining about the continuance of the coining: "Or what can most directly touch the King, our sovereign Lord, and his estate to the prejudice thereof than the counterfeiting of his highness' money? Which has been practised within the Castle of Edinburgh since the publication of the said abstinency, and yet ceaseth not, being a violation of the said abstinency so hurtful that it cannot be suffered."<sup>57</sup> The coining work was of a professional standard and was undoubtedly performed by Mossman and his brother-in-law James Cockie, who were both subsequently hanged.<sup>58</sup> A declaration issued by the King's party on 1st January 1572/3 stated that, since the abstinence at the end of the previous July, "his Majesty's coin was daily counterfeited and adulterated within the Castle of Edinburgh, and given out as lawful money".<sup>59</sup> Thus Mossman must have remained in the Castle throughout this period; and his house at the Netherbow was presumably regarded as being owned by Captain Aikman. Aikman, one supposes, would have had no objection to the house being rented by the Edinburgh Council for use as John Knox's manse.

Another important point is that a considerable number of Edinburgh houses had been damaged and destroyed during the course of the war. This had been done deliberately in many cases and had been especially aimed at supporters of the King's party who had fled Edinburgh.<sup>60</sup> Richard Bannatyne distinguishes between those houses which were "spoiled" and from which the timber was removed for burning, and those which were "clean demolished".<sup>61</sup> Knox had probably been living in a house owned by John Adamson and Bessie Otterburn prior to his

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<sup>57</sup> W. K. Boyd (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603* (Edinburgh, 1905), Vol. 4, p. 370.

<sup>58</sup> See Joan E. L. Murray, "The coinage of the Marians in Edinburgh Castle in 1572", *British Numismatic Journal*, Vol. 57 (1987), pp. 47-53.

<sup>59</sup> R. Bannatyne, *Memorials of Transactions in Scotland, AD MDLXIX-MDLXXIII* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1836), pp. 291-2; Boyd, *Calendar of State Papers Relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603*, Vol. 4, p. 453. The declaration was printed by Thomas Bassandyne at the Netherbow, very near the John Knox House.

<sup>60</sup> Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 8, p. 199. Michael Lynch gives a list, taken mainly from the *Diurnal*, of thirty Edinburgh inhabitants whose houses were destroyed, and suggests that perhaps about fifty houses were destroyed in all; see M. Lynch, *Edinburgh and the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 138-9, 363-5.

<sup>61</sup> Bannatyne, *Memorials*, pp. 234, 247.

departure to St. Andrews in May 1571.<sup>62</sup> Adamson had also moved to safety in St. Andrews where he witnessed Knox's will on 13th May 1572.<sup>63</sup> There is no surviving record of damage to any of Adamson's houses in Edinburgh, but there may well have been damage, particularly to any building which still retained an association with Knox. Knox was exceedingly unpopular with the Queen's party, as can be seen, for instance, in the vicious attack on a soldier from Leith merely because it was discovered that his surname was Knox.<sup>64</sup> Any property left by Knox in Edinburgh was virtually certain to have been looted. The Millers' assumption that Knox simply returned in 1572 to the house he had previously been occupying in 1571 is much less reasonable than first appears.<sup>65</sup>

The strong probability is, then, that Knox was looking for a new house on his return to Edinburgh, and that the John Knox House was unoccupied, and was in a good state of repair given its former owner. The deliberate destruction of Edinburgh property had generated great bitterness, not surprisingly,<sup>66</sup> and perhaps installing Knox in what had been Mossman's house was one way of making a reprisal on a prominent member of the Queen's party.<sup>67</sup> For these various reasons, Mossman's house, so far from being an unlikely candidate for Knox's manse in August 1572, turns out to be an unexpectedly likely one. Furthermore, it had the advantage, as Donald Smith observes, of being a safe military distance from the Castle.<sup>68</sup>

### ***(ii) Knox's health***

Robert Miller's second argument relates to Knox's health, and specifically to his supposed inability to walk the distance between St. Giles and the John Knox House. "The condition of Knox's health," says Miller, "made his residence at the Netherbow, under the circumstances

<sup>62</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, pp. 104-7.

<sup>63</sup> M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (1855 edn.), pp. 436-9.

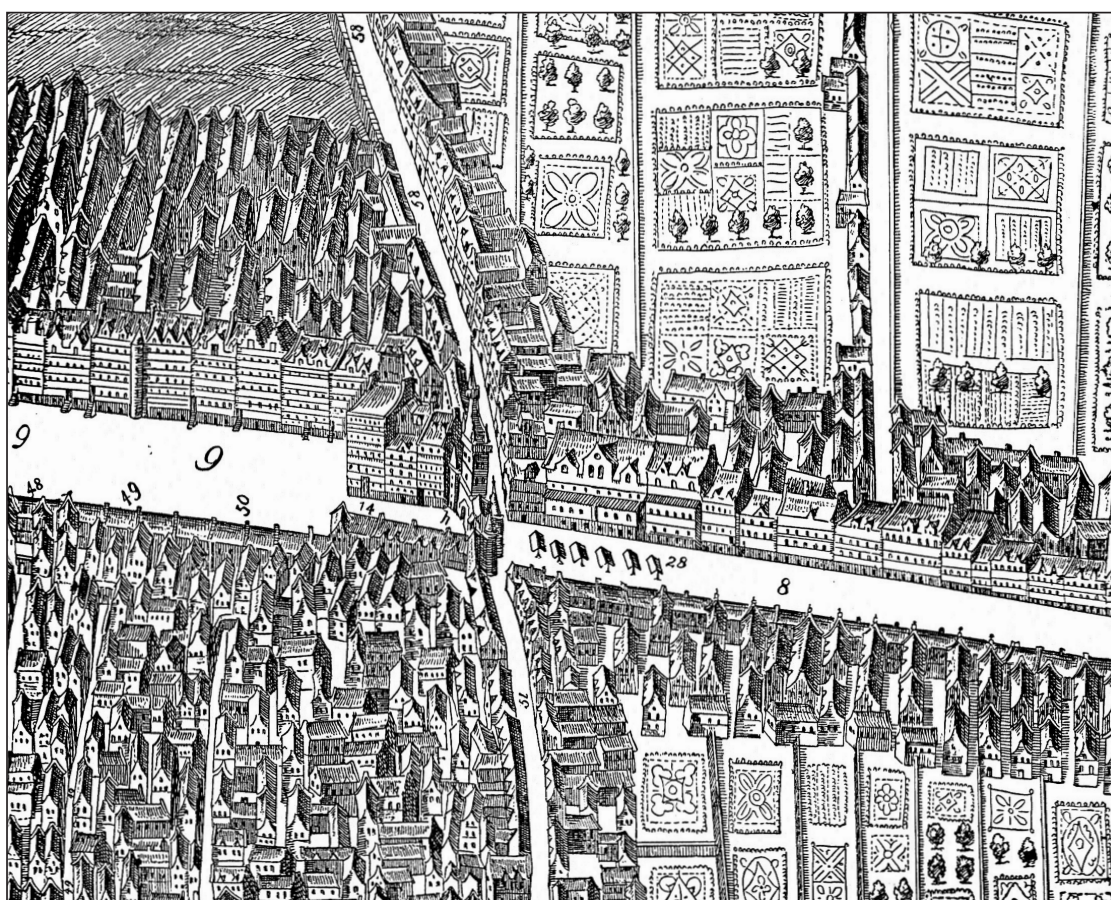
<sup>64</sup> Bannatyne, *Memorials*, p. 229. see also, *ibid.*, pp. 124, 175; Harry Potter, *Edinburgh Under Siege, 1571-1573* (Stroud, 2003), p. 61, for further indications of Knox's unpopularity.

<sup>65</sup> P. Miller, "John Knox and his Manse", pp. 150-1; R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 107.

<sup>66</sup> Bannatyne, *Memorials*, pp. 247, 303; Lynch, *Edinburgh and the Reformation*, p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> The *History and Life of King James the Sext* complains that, as a result of the abstinence, foot-soldiers from the garrison at Leith (of the King's party) were billeted in "honest men's houses", i.e. in the Edinburgh houses of supporters of the Queen's party; see *History and Life of King James the Sext* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1825), p. 119.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *John Knox House*, p. 27.



48, Blackfriars Wynd; 49, Todrig's Wynd; 50, Gray's Wynd; 51, St. Mary's Wynd; 58 Leith Wynd;  
8, Suburbs of the Canongate; 9, High Street; 14, The Nether Bow; h, The Nether-bow Port;  
28, The Flesh Stocks in the Canongate.

*The north side of the High Street near the John Knox House in 1647 from James Gordon of Rothiemay's map.*

[Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland]

narrated by these authorities, practically impossible.”<sup>69</sup> The authorities referred to were Richard Bannatyne and Thomas Smeton whose accounts we shall give in a moment. In addition there is the statement of the English ambassador, Henry Killigrew, in October 1572 to the effect that “John Knox is now so feeble as scarce can he stand alone or speak to be heard of any audience; yet doth he every Sunday cause himself to be carried to a place where a certain number do hear him, and preacheth with the same vehemence and zeal that ever he did”.<sup>70</sup>

Knox's last public engagement was on Sabbath 9th November 1572 when he preached in a small room in St. Giles, called the Tolbooth Church, to about a hundred people, and then came down to the main

<sup>69</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 133 (see also pp. 121-2, 146-9).

<sup>70</sup> Knox, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 633. Killigrew to Burghley and Leicester, 6th October 1572.

church to induct James Lawson as his assistant.<sup>71</sup> There, according to Bannatyne, he “declared to the whole assembly (as his weak voice would serve, which was heard but of a few) the duty of a minister, and also their duty to him likewise; and so made the marriage (in a manner) betwixt Mr. James Lawson, then made minister, and the folk”.<sup>72</sup> To continue the story in what are probably Lawson’s own words (translated from Latin): “Having finished these things, after he had pronounced the blessing upon the people, with a mind more cheerful than usual, but with a weak body and leaning upon his staff, he departed, accompanied by almost the whole assembly to his house, from which he did not again come forth in life.”<sup>73</sup>

Miller’s argument is that Knox was too weak to walk to the Netherbow, and that therefore his house must have been nearer than that. When one looks down from St. Giles to the John Knox House one certainly feels the force of the argument. The John Knox House appears small and far away. Apparently the distance is four hundred and ten yards, but it would be a slow journey with an infirm companion. The walk is significantly downhill, however, which would make it easier. Furthermore, Killigrew’s statement that Knox “cause[d] himself to be carried” to the church is quite understandable if the outward journey was uphill from the John Knox House, but less so if Knox’s manse was “in the immediate neighbourhood” of St. Giles as Robert Miller was suggesting.<sup>74</sup> Knox was clearly able to walk some distance.

Given that Knox could be carried if necessary, there is no difficulty in principle over the burgh Council’s providing a manse for him at a distance from the church; and the only difficulty with the John Knox House relates to his final walk. Guthrie observes that while Knox was at St. Andrews he was walking the distance from the Abbey to the parish church which was at least five hundred and fifty yards, so he had

<sup>71</sup> D. Calderwood, *The True History of the Church of Scotland* (n.p., 1678), p. 60.

<sup>72</sup> Bannatyne, *Memorials*, pp. 280-1; Knox, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 634.

<sup>73</sup> James Lawson’s account (for it is probably his) occurs in the appendix of Thomas Smeton, *Ad Virulentum Archibaldi Hamiltonii Apostatae Dialogum* (Edinburgh, 1579), pp. 115-123. The Latin original of the passage quoted reads: “His demum peractis postquam populo benedixisset animo solito hilariori, corpora vero aegro, et baculo innitente, domum fere toto coetu comitatus concedit, unde postea vivus non est egressus” (ibid., p. 118). The translation (probably by Thomas M’Crie, as we have already mentioned) is in Knox, *Works*, Vol. 6, pp. 645-660 (see p. 654); see also R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 146.

<sup>74</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 147.

certainly been able to walk as far as the John Knox House a few months previously.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, according to Lawson's account, he was unusually cheerful ("with a mind more cheerful than usual") after the induction, which would presumably have assisted his vigour.<sup>76</sup> Wilkinson suggests that Knox died of a lower respiratory tract infection, which he had probably been carrying for a while but which flared up a couple of days after his last sermon.<sup>77</sup> Quite how far Knox was able to walk on the Sabbath evening after the sermon would seem to be anyone's guess.<sup>78</sup>

### *(iii) The late nature of the tradition*

The third argument advanced by the Millers was the late nature of the tradition that Knox had occupied the John Knox House. We have already discussed this argument at some length, but here we want to consider the "other end" of the tradition, and to think about the Knox's enduring memory in the years after his death.

We have already given the description of the congregation accompanying of Knox to his house after his final sermon. Robert Miller takes issue with the identification of Lawson's word "coetus" or "assembly" with "the congregation", saying that it "may be interpreted as applying necessarily to the 'elders' or the 'kirk-session' only".<sup>79</sup> Miller's concern here is to minimize as far as possible the number of people who heard Knox and who accompanied him to his house.<sup>80</sup> M'Crie's translation, however, is supported by Spottiswoode, who was writing fifty or sixty years after the event, and who seems to have had

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<sup>75</sup> Guthrie, "The traditional belief in John Knox's House at the Netherbow vindicated", p. 268; *Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melville*, ed. R. Pitcairn (Wodrow Society, 1842), p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> The words in the original are "animo solito hilariori", with "hilariori" being comparative. Robert Miller translates this as "with his wonted cheerful spirit", *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 146, but two classicists whom we have consulted prefer M'Crie's translation. Whether Knox had a "wonted cheerful spirit" is a matter on which historians are not agreed. Hay Fleming sees him as "richly imbued with the irrepressible spirit of jovial humour", *Martyrs and Confessors of St. Andrews* (Cupar, 1887), p. 157, while Jane Dawson discerns in his later years "paranoia", "bouts of depression", "quarrelsomeness", "[loss of] his former ability to laugh at himself", a "pessimistic outlook", and "deep bitterness", *John Knox*, p. 304.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkinson, *Medical History of the Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox*, p. 107.

<sup>78</sup> The present writer's mother, almost the last time that she ever walked, surprised the whole family by descending a staircase in the middle of the night, letting herself out of the back door, and going up the garden path, where she was found in the morning, far beyond what was thought possible.

<sup>79</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 146.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 144, 150.

some source of information additional to those already given. We quote Spottiswoode's account in full:

At no time was [Knox] heard to speak with greater power and more content to the hearers; and in the end of his sermon, calling God to witness that he had walked in a good conscience amongst them, not seeking to please men, nor serving either his own or other men's affections, but in all sincerity and truth preached the gospel of Christ, with most grave and pithy words he exhorted them to stand fast in the faith they had received; and having conceived a zealous prayer for the continuance of God's blessings upon them, and the multiplying his Spirit upon the preacher who was then to be admitted, he gave them his last farewell. The people did convey him to his lodging, and could not be drawn from it, so loath they were to part with him.<sup>81</sup>

It would seem then, from the contemporary and near-contemporary sources, that Knox was accompanied to his house by a large crowd of people, probably numbering in the hundreds (there is usually a good congregation at inductions). From this, two things follow. The first is that the large crowd tends to support the idea of a house on the High Street, where hundreds of people could easily gather, rather than a manse down a narrow close. It is easier to imagine a crowd of people lingering outside the John Knox House than outside the entrance to a close from which Knox's manse was perhaps not even visible.

The second thing is that this farewell was a significant and memorable public occasion, of the kind, as we have already said, that was likely to be related to grandchildren and remembered by them. Furthermore, there were probably children present in the crowd; and thus the memory would have been retained in Edinburgh for a long time, well into the second half of the seventeenth century. Combining this with what has been said earlier about the other "end" of the tradition, we see that the transmission of the account from 1572 down to the 1790s does not seem at all implausible.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland*, Vol. 2, p. 181.

<sup>82</sup> Guthrie tries to develop a detailed argument along these lines but we are not quite convinced by his arithmetic; see "The traditional belief in John Knox's House at the Netherbow vindicated", p. 269. One person who could have transmitted the information well into the eighteenth century was the Edinburgh antiquary Robert Mylne, who died in 1747 at the age of about 103. He was clear in his mind until near the end of his life. Though of Jacobite sympathies, he was married to the daughter of a Presbyterian



## 5. The candlestick

One further matter which sheds some light on the location of Knox's manse or manses is the attempted murder of him, recorded by David Calderwood. Calderwood wrote three versions of his *History*, in 1627, 1631, and 1636 respectively, and there are slight differences between these versions.<sup>83</sup> All of them were written, however, when there were those still alive who could remember Knox.

In the main published version, written in 1627, Calderwood relates the story as follows: "It was [Knox's] custom to sit at table, in his own house, which was at the head of it, with his back to the window. Yet upon a certain night he sat at a side of the table, when a bullet



*John Knox's candlestick showing the bullet-hole.*  
[Courtesy of the Perth Museum]

was shot in at the window, of purpose to kill him. But the conspirators missed, and the bullet lighted upon the chandler [i.e. candlestick], and made a hole in the foot of it, which is yet to be seen."<sup>84</sup> Calderwood does not date the incident, and it would appear that he had simply been shown the candlestick and told the story connected with it. While the dating does not particularly concern us, it is not likely to have been during the last part of his life for which Richard

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minister, and gathered a vast collection of historical manuscripts, among them the MS copy of Bannatyne's "Memoriales" from which the 1806 edition was printed; see Bannatyne, *Memoriales*, pp. viii-x.

<sup>83</sup> See Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 8, p. 4, for these dates.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 242. M'Crie seems to have thought that a "chandler" was a chandelier, and relates the story somewhat inaccurately: "One evening a musket-ball was fired in at his window, and lodged in the roof of the apartment in which he was sitting. It happened that he sat at the time in a different part of the room from that which he had been accustomed to occupy, otherwise the ball, from the direction it took, must have struck him" (*Life of Knox*, 1855 edn., p. 256).

Bannatyne provides an almost daily diary without mentioning any assassination attempt.<sup>85</sup>

The candlestick is still in existence and is now in the Perth Museum. When it was presented to the Museum, it had the following note attached: “This candlestick belonged to the celebrated John Knox, and was standing before him when he was shot at, and the ball went through the bottom of it. How it came into the possession of my great-grandfather, the Rev. David Williamson, who was minister of St. Cuthbert’s in King Charles the Second’s time, I do not know; but since then it has been in the family of the Williamsons till it was left to me by my uncle, Joseph Williamson, Esq., who died 7th April 1826. (Signed) Alexander Murray.”<sup>86</sup>

The David Williamson referred to was “Dainty Davie” (1636-1706), Moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1702.<sup>87</sup> He was celebrated, among other things, for his seven consecutive wives; and by the seventh of these he had a son Joseph (1706-1795), who was a prominent advocate in Edinburgh and was the father of the Joseph mentioned in the note.<sup>88</sup> Presumably the candlestick belonged to Joseph senior before he passed it on to his son. Joseph senior also had a portrait of Knox which was used for an engraved frontispiece in the 1790 edition of Knox’s *History of the Reformation*.<sup>89</sup> As possessor of the candlestick and minister of St. Cuthbert’s from 1661, David Williamson would surely have known the views on Knox’s places of residence in Edinburgh which were current in the later seventeenth century. While David and Joseph senior hardly overlapped, there were other members of the family who could have passed the father’s knowledge on to his youngest son.<sup>90</sup> Thus we see another line of transmission for the knowledge of Knox’s residence in

<sup>85</sup> Jasper Ridley makes this observation, but then calls into question whether the incident ever occurred (*John Knox*, p. 500). Given the short time between Knox and Calderwood, such suspicion seems excessive. Many people in Britain at present remember stories and possess items from the two World Wars, the veracity and genuineness of which they have not the slightest reason to doubt, even perhaps a hundred years after the event.

<sup>86</sup> *Scottish National Memorials* (Glasgow, 1890), p. 70.

<sup>87</sup> See J. Warrick, *The Moderators of the Church of Scotland from 1690 to 1740* (Edinburgh, 1913), pp. 140-157.

<sup>88</sup> *Herald and Genealogist*, Vol. 7 (1873), pp. 225-229.

<sup>89</sup> Another engraving from the same picture appears in John Kay, *Original Portraits* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1877), Vol. 2, plate 334.

<sup>90</sup> One elder brother of Joseph senior was John Williamson (1679-1740), one of the twelve “Marrowmen”, who was minister of nearby Inveresk; see D. C. A. Agnew, *Theology of Consolation* (privately printed, 1880), pp. 372-5.

Edinburgh; and there was in Joseph senior at least one public figure in Edinburgh in the mid-eighteenth century who had both a special reason for being interested in where Knox had lived and access to a “better-than-traditional” source of information.

The candlestick is quite heavy and the bullet has knocked a substantial hole in the base. The angle at which the ball struck the candlestick would seem to be slightly above the horizontal, so that the bullet had a downward inclination at the time. This could be either because of a deflection or because the would-be murderer was at a higher level than Knox's window. This would not be unlikely in an Edinburgh close which sloped sharply away from the High Street.

The most significant matter from our point of view, however, is the version of the story that Calderwood wrote in 1631. This differs slightly from the 1627 version and contains one important addition: “I cannot pass by here a remarkable sign of God's care and providence watching over him. It was his custom to sit at the head of the table in his own house, with his back to the window, which was at the head of the table. Yet upon a certain night, as he sat at the side of the table, a bullet was shot from the other side of the street in at the window, of purpose to kill him; because the traitor supposed that he was sitting at the head of the table according to his custom. The bullet lighted upon the foot of the candlestick and made a hole in it, as is yet to be seen.”<sup>91</sup> The point of interest is the expression “from the other side of the street” because, with the exception of the John Knox House, all the other manses proposed for Knox were some distance up closes on the north side of the High Street and did not have “another side of the street” from which to be fired upon.<sup>92</sup>

We are not suggesting that Calderwood was correct in locating the incident in the John Knox House (if indeed he was doing this), but what we want to note is that he seems to have been picturing a house on a

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<sup>91</sup> Calderwood, *True History* (1678), p. 61.

<sup>92</sup> See P. Miller, “John Knox and his Manse”, p. 147; P. Miller, “Supplementary notes on John Knox's House”, p. 406; R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, pp. 83-4, 104-5. Gordon's map of 1647 shows the north side of the High street as an unbroken line of houses with doorways into narrow closes just a few feet wide. Maitland comments on how few streets there were in Edinburgh in his day (1753) – only twelve, *History of Edinburgh*, pp. 140, 216. Kincaid says that in 1787 there were only three streets running north-south in the Old Town “that can at all deserve the name of streets” (namely St. Mary's Wynd, Leith Wynd, and the West Bow) and the rest “are very narrow irregular built lanes”, *History of Edinburgh*, p. 107.

street. He had opportunity of knowing where Knox had lived, and especially that manse in which Knox had died, and when the story of the attempted murder was related to him, the picture that came to his mind, unwittingly perhaps, was of a house on a street.<sup>93</sup> The presumption would be that this was the John Knox House.

## 6. Conclusion

We have seen that the tradition concerning Knox's occupancy of the John Knox House was well established by the 1790s and that there is no strong reason to call it into question. The path of transmission may be unknown but there is no difficulty over the plausibility of that path. The house was a likely one to have been given to Knox on his return from St. Andrews; and if he did occupy it and die there then that fact was likely to have been remembered in just the way that we find. There are also incidental details in Spottiswoode and Calderwood which favour the John Knox House against other candidates that have been proposed. The balance of probabilities is decidedly in support of the tradition; and probability is often all that one can hope for in sixteenth century history, even when contemporary written sources are available.

One other conclusion suggested by our study is that there may be a need to look more closely at Robert Miller's attempted identification of Knox's other manses. His views on these have been generally accepted, and a plaque now marks the supposed site of Knox's manse in Warriston Close from 1560-1566,<sup>94</sup> but one wonders how carefully Miller's arguments have been checked. Peter Miller's views, published several years earlier, were entirely in conflict with his, but Robert Miller brushed them aside without discussion.<sup>95</sup> He made no attempt to explain where or to what extent Peter Miller had gone wrong. For example, Peter Miller gave a map of over twenty residents in the vicinity of Turing's Close, one of whom was Knox.<sup>96</sup> How much of this map remains valid? The only

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<sup>93</sup> Calderwood was in or around Edinburgh for most of the time between 1590 and 1604; see Alan R. Macdonald, "David Calderwood: the not so hidden years", *Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 74 (1995), pp. 69-74.

<sup>94</sup> The plaque was set up before 1923; see C. B. Boog Watson, "Notes on the names of the closes and wynds of old Edinburgh", *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, Vol. 12 (1923), pp. 1-156 (p. 27).

<sup>95</sup> In a book of over a hundred and fifty pages, Robert Miller's sole comment on Peter Miller's two papers on Knox's manses was that "the sites of the houses were incorrectly given", *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. 128.

<sup>96</sup> P. Miller, "John Knox and his Manse", p. 147.

person who has commented on the Millers' rival assertions was Guthrie, who said that he had "still an open mind between them".<sup>97</sup> In the preface to his book, Robert Miller said that "he had to change his opinions on many points many times, as fresh evidence came to light".<sup>98</sup> This suggests a subject that is delicately poised and requires special care; but we have seen from his handling of Stark, and M'Crie, and Knox's last days, that Robert Miller could be hasty and over-confident as a historian, as indeed could Peter Miller. A careful re-weighing of their arguments is a desideratum.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Guthrie, "The traditional belief in John Knox's House at the Netherbow vindicated", p. 265. The Edinburgh archivist Marguerite Wood is also said to have conducted "a detailed examination of the facts" but this may have related simply to Knox's occupancy of the John Knox House; see RCAMS, *The City of Edinburgh*, p. 96.

<sup>98</sup> R. Miller, *John Knox and the Town Council of Edinburgh*, p. viii.

<sup>99</sup> Boog Watson says that "the whole question of the dwelling place of John Knox has been thoroughly investigated by Robert Miller". This would be somewhat reassuring, except that Boog Watson seems in his article to cite Miller as an independent authority rather than as one whose work he has had the opportunity of confirming; see "Notes on the names of the closes and wynds of old Edinburgh", p. 22.

