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The Plot Thickens

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In April 1682 a young gentlewoman called Elizabeth Edmonstone was summoned to appear before the Privy Council in Edinburgh. She was accused of giving a female servant a sweetmeat that was in fact a poisonous tablet reputed to ‘work strange wanton affections and humours in the bodies of women’ⁱ. The unfortunate servant had nearly died as a result. In this paper I will explore how the facts of an historical incident can be transformed into fiction.

I first encountered Elizabeth Edmonstone when researching my PhD project, an historical novel based on the true story of Thomas Aikenhead, a young medical student who was hanged for blasphemy in Edinburgh in 1697. There is a fair amount of primary source material about Aikenhead’s case: pamphlets, letters, newspaper reports and court records. In spite of – or perhaps because of - this plethora of material I found myself struggling to find a way in to Thomas Aikenhead’s story. I decided I’d try a tangential approach to get me going, and write a short story based on one of the peripheral incidents from Aikenhead’s family background. Fortunately for historians, Aikenhead’s family were a litigious bunch: both his father and mother were in trouble with the law several times, and appear in various legal records. Indeed, his mother was imprisoned for debt in 1685ⁱⁱ. However, the episode that interested me most was when James Aikenhead, Thomas’s father, was summoned before the Privy Council in the case of Elizabeth Edmonstoneⁱⁱⁱ.

This short story has grown to such an extent that it has changed my whole idea for the finished novel. It’s still a work-in-progress, so the discussion that follows reflects its provisional status.

Chronology of Events

Let’s return to the people involved in the aphrodisiac incident, and work out the chronology of events.

James Aikenhead, an Edinburgh apothecary, has been producing an aphrodisiac tablet. Word spreads. Undoubtedly it’s a popular product. A male servant comes to his shop, and buys some of the aphrodisiac. He’s acting on the orders of Elizabeth Edmonstone, daughter of the Laird of Duntreath. She gives the aphrodisiac to a female servant called Jonet Stewart, telling her it is a sweetmeat. Jonet becomes dangerously feverish, suffering for twenty days before the intervention of a Dr Irvine saves her life.

It’s unclear from the records who took the decision to pursue a prosecution in this matter. Jonet Stewart was a servant in the house of William Dundas, an advocate. We can perhaps assume that then – as now – it’s not a good idea to get on the wrong side of a lawyer. Edinburgh was a small city – the 1694 Poll Tax records show there were 33 Doctors of Medicine, 36 advocates and 19 apothecaries^{iv} – and it was taut with religious and political tension. No doubt there were times when scores could be settled via the courts. We also know that there was professional rivalry between physicians and apothecaries, so perhaps Dr Irvine would have had an interest in bringing the

case to the attention of the Privy Council. Regardless of who was the driving force, Elizabeth, her hapless servant and James Aikenhead appeared before the Privy Council. They were found 'guilty of an open and manifest crime' and deserving of being 'exemplarily punished'^v. The case was passed over to the Royal College of Physicians for further investigation, although I've not yet been able to find out what the outcome of their enquiries was. Whatever their punishment was, it did not appear to damage Elizabeth's prospects: five years later she was married to James Montgomery of Greyabbey, a member of one of the most prominent and wealthy planter families in Ulster. They went on to have nine children, so obviously they had no need for aphrodisiacs. Indeed, James Aikenhead seems to have come off the worst of all parties involved in the case. Within a year of the trial he was dead, bequeathing nothing but debts to his widow and children^{vi}.

Shaping the facts and fictions into a plot

Moving from a chronological sequence to a plot means that these events must be transformed from a straight line into something more organic. There are motivations, personalities and conflicts to be considered. Crucial pieces of information must be withheld from the reader until the time is right for their revelation. A decision must be made about who is to be the viewpoint character. I decided that I would experiment with using some of the techniques of crime fiction. So, we have the victim, Jonet Stewart, and the perpetrator, Elizabeth Edmonstone, assisted by her servant. James Aikenhead is Elizabeth's unwitting accomplice. Dr Irvine seems best placed for the role of detective. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a fictional detective must have a complicated and unhappy personal life, so I supply Dr Irvine with a new wife who has left him after a disastrous wedding night. That authorial decision adds some more ingredients to the plot: Dr Irvine wants his wife to return, partly to avoid the social ignominy of a failed marriage, but also to resolve why a courtship that seemed so promising of sexual fulfilment should have ended up with humiliation. In the first draft of the story the wedding night problems arose from a combination of Dr Irvine's inexperience and his bride's shock at the unromantic reality of sex. I'm now experimenting with a different version of this episode, where the problem lies entirely with Dr Irvine. His professional work, particularly a recent dissection of a young female who had died in childbirth, has completely skewed his attitude to the female body. He is acutely aware of the skull beneath the skin, the mess of internal organs contained inside even the most alluring of physiques.

The story – now firmly in the realm of fiction - opens with Dr Irvine summoned to give his expert opinion on Jonet Stewart's mysterious, life-threatening illness. He suspects some sort of poisoning, but his efforts to treat her are hampered by him not knowing to which toxic substance she has been exposed. A search of Jonet's belongings reveals an empty pillbox of the type used by apothecaries to dispense their wares. Every drama is heightened by the introduction of a figurative ticking clock, so Dr Irvine is racing against time to find a cure. He is assisted in this by some additional, invented characters: Fenton, an apothecary whom he looks down upon as his social inferior, and Dr Maxwell, a sensualist who makes him feel gauche and inadequate. First they track down James Aikenhead, then the trail leads them to Elizabeth.

So, how will the sexually tormented Dr Irvine respond to Elizabeth? What sort of young woman was she, really? We know she gave the aphrodisiac tablet to Jonet Stewart, but we don't know why. Was it a prank that went badly wrong? An act of malice? Part of some spicy lesbian liaison? A prudent – if selfish – decision to use Jonet as a guinea pig before taking the tablet herself? If the latter, why was she – the respectable unmarried daughter of a Laird – planning to take the tablet? Did she have an innocent idea of it as a 'love potion', like the one Oberon dropped on Titania's eyelids in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? To allow the plot to develop, I need to decide which of these people Elizabeth is. My approach to this sort of decision is usually to get writing, and try out the several possible Elizabeths. It's only when the various versions of her are put to the test that I'll know which one is right for this story.

In trying to create a credible Elizabeth, I need to consider both her own background and the historical context of the period. The decades from 1638 to 1688 were a particularly turbulent time in Scottish history. The crux of the problem was the tension between Presbyterians, who believed that churches should have a reasonable degree of local autonomy, and Episcopalians, who wanted a 'top-down' structure of control, with Bishops calling the shots. It may seem incomprehensible to us that people were prepared to kill and be killed over such a matter, but they were, and many thousands died as a result of their beliefs during this time. Matters were made more complicated by the King's support for the Episcopal faction, so that an issue that was at heart a matter of theology also became a test of loyalty. The balance of power shifted between these two parties throughout this period, with the Presbyterians eventually emerging triumphant in 1690. Indeed, many of the personalities involved in the eventual prosecution and execution of young Thomas Aikenhead were Presbyterians who had suffered imprisonment, torture and persecution for their beliefs in the 1680s. Their experience did not seem to imbue them with compassion, because once they had power they proved to be as intolerant of dissent as their own tormentors had been.

Elizabeth was one of nine children, of whom only three survived into adulthood. Her father had inherited his title in infancy, and owned a house and substantial land in County Antrim as well as Duntreath Castle in Stirling. He was a staunch Presbyterian, and he was imprisoned in 1667 for allowing a Presbyterian clergyman to conduct a service at Duntreath. Elizabeth must have been a young child when this occurred. It was not uncommon for the children of the gentry to spend time apart from their parents during this period. Many were placed with other respectable families in Edinburgh, perhaps to enable them to be educated, or simply for company. However, these troubled decades must also have seen many noble families rendered fatherless (temporarily or permanently) by imprisonment, exile, execution and death in conflict. It is easy to imagine the effect such uncertainty might have on a child's behaviour. An eminent diarist of the period^{vii} noted several incidents where children of gentry families got into trouble. Most often this was for rioting and disorder, but in once case a Laird's son was prosecuted for mischievously forging the Royal Signet – the seal used to authorised important legal documents. When Elizabeth's misdemeanour is added in to this mix, we start to get the impression of a group of young people who are

running wild. Edinburgh could be a boisterous place, particularly for those with no employment to keep them out of bother.

At this point I hit a problem common to the careless writer of historical fiction. I came across the real Dr Irvine in the online version of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography^{viii} and he was quite different to the fictional character I had created. He was no longer a passing reference in a court document, but a well-known man with several publications to his name. He was also, at the time of the Elizabeth Edmonstone case, a man of 62 – far from the tortured young husband I have invented. I suppose the lesson from this is that I should do more research before the writing begins. More pressingly, how should I proceed now? It seems to me I have several options. The first is to blithely ignore historical fact, in the manner of so many television costume dramas, and retain the version of Dr Irvine I had invented. The second is to completely rework the story, incorporating the real Dr Irvine's story. The third is to change his name and make him entirely fictional – perhaps he could become a promising young physician who assisted Dr Irvine in saving Jonet Stewart's life, and had to accept that the better-established man took the credit. My feeling is that the third option is the best one: my fictional Dr Irvine had all sorts of anxieties about class and status. Turning him into... – let's call him Dr Carruth - who is forced to work in the shadow of the senior man, would add another layer of complexity to his character, and his relationship with the world. The historian Anthony Beevor suggests that writers should 'change the names of real historical characters to emphasise that their version is at least one step away from reality,'^{ix} but in some ways this seems disingenuous. Turning a real historical event into a roman à clef would be the worst of both worlds, with all the constraints of the facts – albeit in disguise - but none of ballast of authenticity. I may take a step back from imagining the real Dr Irvine's inner life, but he needs to stay in the story.

This brings me to the issue of character motivation. In a case like that of Elizabeth Edmonstone and Dr Irvine we are in possession of certain facts, but we don't know why the real people acted in the way they did. This is actually an area of great freedom for writers, particularly in a post-Freudian world. Even if Elizabeth and Dr Irvine had kept full and frank journals, how much of their accounts would have been knowingly misleading or unwittingly self-deceiving? We all rewrite our own biographies, and find justifications for our actions. As writers we are in the privileged position of really knowing our invented characters. We have an obligation to be clear-sighted about their motivations. Perhaps one way to mitigate our authorial impertinence in attributing motivations to people who really did exist is to offer up our own less than admirable impulses to the transformative machine that is fiction. I can take my own seething envy when an acquaintance achieves success, and transform it to Dr Carruth's professional jealousy of Dr Irvine. I can take the confusion of emotions surrounding a moment of ill-judgement in my undergraduate days (I'll not go into the details...) and transform it into Elizabeth Edmonstone's horror as her prank with the aphrodisiac goes badly wrong; her shame at having done a wrong thing; her impulse to protect herself by concealing her involvement.

These twin threads of historical context and character motivation are key to transforming historical material into fiction. Research by itself is necessary but insufficient. As the novelist Helen Dunmore says, 'writers do the research in order to be at home with the material: in order to half-forget it, in the way that one half-forgets one's own past.' The author needs to move beyond the known facts and into the 'intimacy and resonance of being alive at that time, not knowing what is to come...'^x

Of course the writer of historical fiction will attempt to shape events and characters into a satisfying arc – the audience expects no less – but the historical material should not make the task more difficult. Creative writers – like good journalists – need to have a nose for a story. The very fact of the event capturing the writer's imagination in the first place demonstrates that it contains the germ of a captivating narrative.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, what have I learned from this process, and what advice would I give others who are embarking on a piece of fact-based historical fiction?

First of all, I'd say be patient with the plot. Allow it to emerge in its own time. By all means use the known facts as points on the map of the story, but don't be too hasty about working out how to get from one point to the next. Experiment with the constraints of a particular genre, such as crime fiction, and see what happens.

Secondly, beware assumptions. It's easy to jump to conclusions about people's motivations, but this can result in flat or clichéd characters. Don't just grab at the received ideas of how people behaved or thought in the past. Explore as many options as you can think of.

And finally, look for parallels between your characters and yourself. Draw on your own experiences, emotions and motivations, even if they seem far removed from the events you are fictionalising. Be prepared to honestly examine your own inner life, and don't be afraid to use the findings in your work.

ⁱ Howell, T. B., *A complete collection of state trials and proceedings for high treason*, vol 13 (Google Books [Hansard], accessed 2010)
http://books.google.com/books?id=lj9OLM576SUC&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_sslider_thumb#v=onepage&q=&f=false

ⁱⁱ Graham, Michael F., *The Blasphemies of Thomas Aikenhead* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008)

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Dingwall, H., *Late Seventeenth-century Edinburgh: A demographic study* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1994)

^v *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, third series, 16 vols (Edinburgh, HM General Register House, 1908-) vii, pp. 389-90

^{vi} Graham, Op. Cit.

vii Laing, D. (ed.), *Historical Notices of Scottish Affairs Selected from the Manuscripts of Sir John Lauder of Fountainhall*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, Bannatyne Club, 1848)

viii Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (online, accessed 2010), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14466>

ix Beevor, A. (2011) 'Author, Author', *Guardian Review*, 19th February

x Dunmore, H. (2011) 'Guardian Book Club: on writing *The Siege*', *Guardian Review*, 19th February