

Dumfries' Dark Past: Dissection of a Death Mask

Three objects stood out to me each time I roamed the rooms of Dumfries Museum. Fascinated by them, I questioned their reason for existence, and no answers sprang to mind; yet I always found myself lingering in the small corner where they resided. I figured these objects were simply created for the purpose of entertainment, to show off a twisted destiny that would shock anyone who heard the background of these items. Despite these musings, years later I now have my own (modern) interpretation of them – to give an example of how tight our communities, in Dumfries and Galloway, are. Additionally, I believe they remind us that we should strive to honour our region's mottos; for example, "A Lore Burn" originating from my local town, Dumfries, meaning to protect the town and everyone in it; which I believe is demonstrated fiercely in the accounts I will analyse in this report.



*Dumfries Museum
& Camera
Obscura*

Three death masks, each telling a grisly tale of murder and execution, can be found at Dumfries Museum & Camera Obscura – however, one of these masks is much more significant than it seems (when it comes to our region), not only telling a tale of terror, but one of Dumfries and Galloway's rich history. The masks, visualising three cold-blooded killers, were received from Dr Thomas Grierson's Museum in Thornhill in 1965; after Grierson's death in 1889, the Department of Education for Scotland eventually decided to disperse the collection to local institutions, allowing Dumfries Museum to acquire a multitude of Grierson's curiosities. If you decide to explore the museum, you will locate the death masks

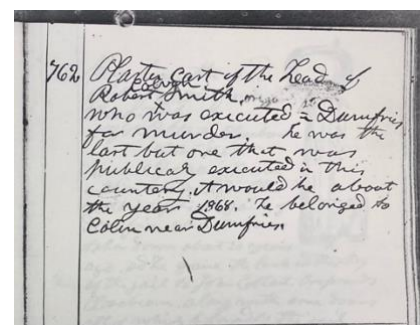


*My interpretation of Grierson
in his museum*

previously procured by Dr Thomas Grierson, as well as a plethora of other artefacts from his accumulation of fascinating objects.

Among the death masks of Marie Manning and Thomas Monroe is the face of Robert Smith, condemned for the rape and murder of young girl, Thomasina Scott, as well as the attempted murder of Jane Crichton. Smith was hung in Dumfries on the 12th of May 1868, and was the last public execution to take place in Scotland: clearly displaying the historical significance of our small town. More importantly, the exhibition of Robert Smith's death mask publicises society in 1800s Dumfries and Galloway, as well as posing the question of the necessity of a death mask.

Victorians showed a large interest in phrenology – a term few would understand in this day and age. Phrenology refers to the study of the configuration of the skull in order to determine traits of character; the idea that an individual's physical appearance may hold clues as to their



Grierson's report of Smith's death mask: "Plaster Cast of the head of Robert Colvin Smith, who was executed in Dumfries for murder. He was the last but one that was publicly executed in the country. It would be about the year 1868. He belonged to Colvin near Dumfries."

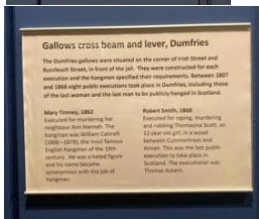
personality. Death masks principally came about as a result of this (amongst other reasons), allowing you to take a wax or plaster cast from a corpse so as to make a mould of someone's face. Extreme criminal cases seldom occurred in Dumfries & Galloway; perhaps Victorians took the opportunities to study every aspect of these cases, in an effort to link clues which may have given a forewarning of cause and motive for such crimes (hence the death masks). Succeeding Robert Smith's court case in April of 1868, the court reporter remarked that "his face indicates susceptibility to fits of extreme passion, it is not of the low criminal type" *(1), as well as detailing him as possessing swarthy skin and a sturdy build. This makes us ponder: was the phrenology correct in Smith's instance? Certainly, a prominent author of the time Charles Dickens, firmly believed in being able to scrutinise a persons' nature from their physiognomy and used this concept in his novel 'David Copperfield' where his character Magwitch had his head measured in prison in a phrenological examination. This negative predisposition towards people who were unfortunate enough to have "bad heads"* (2) would hardly lead to our concept of a fair trial today, but given Smith's probable guilt these now obsolete beliefs would underscore his culpability to the Victorian psyche.

No. 7.
Robert
Smith.
Dumfries,
April 28,
1868.
Rape,
Murder,
&c.

ROBERT SMITH was accused of ' Rape ; as
' also Murder ; as also Theft ; as also Assault, especially
' when committed by Discharging Loaded Firearms, and
' by Cutting or Stabbing, and to the great effusion of
' blood, serious injury of the person, and danger of life,
' and with Intent to Kill,' and ' of the statutory crimes or
' offences set forth in the second section of the statute 10th
' Geo. IV., cap. 38, of ' wilfully, maliciously, and unlaw-
' fully shooting at any of Her Majesty's subjects ; and of
' wilfully, maliciously, and unlawfully stabbing or cutting

High Court Report on Robert Smith

Eaglesfield was home for Robert Colvin Smith, a nineteen-year-old farm labourer, who at nine years of age was forced to work with limekilns and as a farm servant after being orphaned a year prior. This leads me to consider whether the loss of his parents was the



Dumfries Museum exhibition showing a part of the gallows used on Robert Smith

turning point in his life as in stark contrast to his previous unremarkable existence in the countryside he would soon become infamous for a truly ghastly offence. On the day of the crime, February 1st 1868, Smith sat in the kitchen of Longford Cottage with one of its inhabitants, Jane Crichton, when Thomasina Scott (a nine-year-old local girl) entered. Smith directed Scott into Croftshead Wood, where thereafter only one of the two would ever leave, as the young man would proceed to strangle the girl with his shoelace after raping her. During his abuse, Smith stole 9 shillings and 11 pence – is this what he felt a life was worth? Afterwards, he attacked Jane Crichton, wary of the fact that she may disclose

incriminating evidence about him to police. Fortunately, multiple eyewitnesses spotted Smith in the area during his violence, granting authorities the ability to tie him in with the offence. Post crime, he stated that his motive for the unforgivable acts he committed was his rape of the child. Shortly following eight o'clock in the morning on Tuesday 12th May 1868, Smith found himself approaching the scaffolding by Buccleuch Street Prison, confronting a hushed crowd composed of women and youths from the mill. Despite the circumstances, it was reported that he appeared tranquil, and at peace with his fate. A paltry seventeen days later, public executions

were discontinued when the Capital Punishment Amendment Bill was introduced in Scotland on the 29th of May 1868. Due to the minimal amount of time between Smith's punishment and the abolishment of public executions, the authorities felt that a screen between the audience and the condemned was warranted during the execution.

After examining the story, it appears that the court reporter's words hold some weight; Robert Smith was, in fact, of the high criminal type with violent outbursts. Could this suggest that findings from phrenology may be valid? Though it is difficult to determine, it seems that the court reporter was correct in this case. While there is strong interest even today in scrutinising specifics of his story to discount this pseudoscience, I believe it is far more important to draw attention to the victims' accounts, and their way of life. In our endless fascination with the macabre we all too often focus on the perpetrator and overlook the profound affect their selfish actions have on the lives they touch, through their violent and aggressive actions.

Known for her intelligence, Thomasina Scott was the nine-year-old sister to twelve siblings, born and raised in Cummertrees. In the 1861 census it states that she was living with her parents, her granny and eight of her older siblings as she was only two at that time. Her father was a shoemaker, which was a booming industry in Dumfries in the mid-1800s. Her mother would regularly send her on shopping trips to Annan, with no trouble or signs of danger; until an ordinary Saturday, at around half past ten in the morning. Scott was making her weekly trip, when she, half-way between Cummertrees and Annan, made the grave mistake of agreeing to go the rest of the way with Robert Smith, whom she met while paying a brief visit to her acquaintance, Mrs. Crichton. She, regrettably, never returned from her errand, and Scott's poignant and harrowing story has haunted the area, preserved forever within the plaster holding the shape of her killer's face.



Scott's family home, Brooms Cottage



Crichton's residence, Longfords Cottage, where one of the crimes took place

A family servant, Jane Crichton (born 1823 in Lochmaben) resided in Longford Cottage, with her husband Robert Crichton, an agricultural labourer, as well as her two sons – Robert and Edward. Prior to the incursion, Jane Crichton was accompanied by Robert Smith in her kitchen when Thomasina Scott entered seeking shelter from rain. Shortly afterwards the pair departed on their trip and Crichton began to complete chores; she was washing the kitchen floors when she felt a strike hit her (which transpired to be fire tongs), followed by slashes across her neck (caused by a pocketknife); a horrifying attempt from Smith to silence her in fear of being implicated in the crime as only she

held the knowledge that he had been with Thomasina. Thankfully, two young boys rapped on her door with the intention of delivering a message – just in the nick of time to deter Smith from his crime as well as giving Crichton time to reach the door and seek help. The boys, extremely alarmed, rushed to find assistance and on their way they caught sight of Smith during his escape, recognising him instantly. The police scoured the area after the murder going so far as to alert officers in nearby Carlisle. Robert Smith was finally apprehended in Dumfries, in a building on Queensberry Street (which I believe was demolished to create Great King Street), in blood-stained clothing and possessing money presumed to be stolen from little Thomasina. Jane Crichton miraculously survived the attack and managed to contribute to Robert Smith's demise, gaining closure for both her, and

Thomasina's family. Longfords cottage was her home for at least a further three years, however, she appears to have moved shortly before her death, as shown in her death record – likely because of the trauma she suffered. She only lived a further six years, to the age of forty-nine, before passing on in 1874 when, sadly, her two boys were only thirteen and ten years old. While there is little trace of Robert in the 1881 census and those that followed, Edward seems to have relocated to Edinburgh where he initially stayed with his elder sister and her family. He was a railway worker, beginning his career as a railway engine cleaner and moving up the ranks ten years later to become a railway fireman. Despite the tragedy of Jane Crichton's early death, it brings comfort to know that at least two of her three children went on to have settled lives. Though the amendment on her death certificate states that she died due to natural causes, one cannot help but wonder whether the injuries she sustained at the hands of Robert Smith had some bearing on her fate.

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1874 DEATHS in the Parish of *Commochies* in 1874

Name and Surname, Rank or Profession, and whether Single, Married, or Widowed.	When and Where Died.	Sex.	Age.	Name, Surname, & Rank or Profession of Father.	Name, and Station Surname of Mother.
<i>Jane Crichton</i>	<i>1874 February Edinburgh</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>James Patterson</i>	<i>Widow Turner (deceased)</i>
<i>Married to Robert Crichton, General Edinburgh</i>	<i>Edinburgh Cottages</i>			<i>Jane Patterson</i>	<i>Widow (deceased)</i>

A record of Jane Crichton's death

I found myself visiting Thomasina's home and the cottage further down the lane where arguably the 'heroine' of our piece, Jane Crichton, was found bloody from Smith's attack. It is a quiet place and there is no hint of the atrocious events which took place so long ago. The community that supported Crichton on the day and brought Smith so swiftly to justice have long since passed but their spirit is still present in the close-knit communities that permeate our region.

This heinous offence shows a darker side to the history of Dumfries and Galloway; however, it is also relevant to the narrative of the area as well as showcasing the lives of the individuals who created the district we know today. Notoriety was brought to the town of Dumfries and its surroundings due to the fact that the last public execution in Scotland was held in the town centre, as was the execution of Mary Timney, the last woman to be hanged in Scotland in 1862. Moreover, we are reminded of how the small community of Dumfries managed to bring a sickening murderer to justice, and of their dedication to this cause. Demonstrating how committed our antecedents were, the death mask of Robert Smith inspires courage in people today to do what is right for our region and persevere through difficult times.

This particular death mask found in a mere corner of the Dumfries Museum & Camera Obscura puts the lives of Doonhamers on display, providing us with evidence of how determined the townspeople were to hunt down this vicious killer in order to honour Thomasina Scott's memory and allow Jane Crichton to live in peace. No matter how shaken they were, the local people were unwavering and resolute in finding justice for those harmed. Keeping a record of peoples' views from the time; presenting the history of regular people from Dumfries and Galloway for all to see; bringing historical importance to our towns and villages; the gruesome attests to Smith's death mask are an important part of the area to exhibit, as they remind our region of the



The death mask of Robert Smith

countless tales we have to tell that, in turn, illuminate the strong bonds within our communities.

Sources

With thanks to Joanne Turner and Dumfries Museum staff

*(1) <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/mediaui-viewer/tree/60117593/person/270013154506/media/0f9d4502-21ab-422b-a2cd-6f995fb5a01>

*(2) <https://nursingclio.org/2020/12/08/rediscovering-good-and-bad-heads-in-the-phrenological-present/>

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