

# Robert Chambers

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**Robert Chambers** (10 July 1802 – 17 March 1871), Scottish author and publisher.



Robert Chambers, publisher and author

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## Early Life

Robert and his older brother William were both born in the rural country town of Peebles in the Scottish Borders at the turn of the 19th century. In those days the town had changed little in hundreds of years. There was an old part of town and a new part of town, each consisting of little more than a single street. Peebles was mainly inhabited by weavers and labourers living in thatched cottages.<sup>[1]</sup> His father, James Chambers, made his living as a cotton manufacturer. Their slate roofed house was built by James Chamber's father as a wedding gift for his son, and the ground floor functioned as the family workshop.<sup>[2]</sup>

A small circulating library in the town, run by Alexander Elder, introduced Robert to books and developed his literary interests when he was young. Occasionally, his father would buy books

for the family library, and one day Robert found a complete set of the fourth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* hidden away in a chest in the attic. He eagerly read this for many years. Near the end of his life, Chambers remembered feeling "a profound thankfulness that such a convenient collection of human knowledge existed, and that here it was spread out like a well-plenished table before me."<sup>[3]</sup> William later recalled that for Robert, "the acquisition of knowledge was with him the highest of earthly enjoyments."<sup>[4]</sup>

Robert was sent to local schools and showed unusual literary taste and ability, though he found his schooling to be uninspiring and non-influential. His education was typical for the day. The country school, directed by James Gray, taught the boys reading, writing, and, for an additional charge, arithmetic. In grammar school it was the classics - Latin and Ancient Greek, with some English composition thrown in for good measure. Boys bullied one another and the teacher gave corporal punishment in the classroom for unruly behavior. Although uninspired by the school, Robert made up this at

the bookseller. Strangely enough, both Robert and William were born with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Their parents attempted to correct this abnormality through operations, and while William's was successful Robert was left partially lame. So while other boys roughed it outside, Robert was content to stay indoors and study his books.<sup>[5]</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Robert surpassed his older brother in his education, which he continued for several years beyond William's. Robert had been destined for the ministry, but at the age of fifteen he dropped this intended career. The arrival of the power loom suddenly threatened James Chambers' cotton business, forcing him to close it down and become a draper. During this time, James began to socialise with a number of French prisoners of war on parole who were stationed in Peebles. Unfortunately, James Chambers lent these exiles a large amount of credit, and when they were abruptly transferred away he was forced to declare bankruptcy. The family moved to Edinburgh in 1813. Robert continued his education, and William became a bookseller's apprentice. In 1818 Robert, just 16

years old, began his own business as a bookstall-keeper on Leith Walk. At first, his entire stock consisted of a some old books belonging to his father, amounting to thirteen feet of shelf space and worth no more than a few pounds. By the end of the first year the value of his stock went up to twelve pounds, and modest success came gradually.<sup>[6]</sup>

## **Early Works**

While Robert built up a business his brother William expanded his own by purchasing a homemade printing press and publishing pamphlets as well as creating his own type. Soon afterwards, Robert and William decided to join forces - with Robert writing and William printing. Their first joint venture was a magazine series called *The Kaleidoscope, or Edinburgh Literary Amusement*, sold for threepence. This was issued every two weeks between 6 October 1821 and 12 January 1822.<sup>[7]</sup> It was followed by *Illustrations of the Author of Waverley* (1822), which offered sketches of individuals believed to have been the inspirations for some of the characters in Walter Scott's works of fiction.<sup>[8]</sup>

The last book to be printed on William's old press was the *Traditions of Edinburgh* (1824), derived from Robert's enthusiastic interest in the history and antiquities of Edinburgh. He followed this with *Walks in Edinburgh* (1825), and these books gained him the approval and personal friendship of Walter Scott. After Scott's death, Robert paid tribute to him by writing a *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1832). Robert also wrote a *History of the Rebellions in Scotland from 1638 to 1745* (5 vols., 1828) and numerous other works on Scotland and Scottish traditions.

## **W. & R. Chambers**

The two brothers eventually united as partners in the publishing firm of W. & R. Chambers. In the beginning of 1832 William Chambers started a weekly publication under the title of Chambers's *Edinburgh Journal* (known since 1854 as Chambers's *Journal of Literature, Science and Arts*), which speedily attained a large circulation. Robert was at first only a contributor. After fourteen numbers had appeared, however, he was associated with his brother as joint editor, and his collaboration

contributed more perhaps than anything else to the success of the *Journal*.

Among the other numerous works of which Robert was in whole or in part the author, the *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (4 vols., Glasgow, 1832–1835), the *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (1844), the *Life and Works of Robert Burns* (4 vols., 1851), *Ancient Sea Margins* (1848), the *Domestic Annals of Scotland* (1859–1861) and the *Book of Days* (2 vols., 1862–1864) were the most important.

*Chambers's Encyclopaedia* (1859–1868), with Dr Andrew Findlater as editor, was carried out under the superintendence of the brothers. The *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* contains a series of admirably selected extracts from the best authors of every period, "set in a biographical and critical history of the literature itself." For the *Life of Burns* he made diligent and laborious original investigations, gathering many hitherto unrecorded facts from the poet's sister, Mrs Begg, to whose benefit the whole profits of the work were generously devoted.

## *Vestiges*

*For more details on this topic, see  
Vestiges of the Natural History of  
Creation.*

During the 1830s, Robert Chambers took a particularly keen interest in the then rapidly expanding field of geology, and he was elected a fellow of the Geological Society of London in 1844. Prior to this, he was elected a member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1840, which connected him through correspondence to numerous scientific men. William later recalls that "His mind had become occupied with speculative theories which brought him into communication with Sir Charles Bell, George Combe, his brother Dr. Andrew Combe, Dr. Neil Arnott, Professor Edward Forbes, Dr. Samuel Brown, and other thinkers on physiology and mental philosophy."<sup>[9]</sup>

In 1848 he published his first geological book on *Ancient Sea Margins*. Later, he toured Scandinavia and Canada for the purpose of



geological exploration. The results of his travels were published in *Tracings of the North of Europe* (1851) and *Tracings in Iceland and the Faroe Islands* (1856). However, his most popular book, influenced by his geological studies and interest in speculative theories, was a work to which he never officially attached his name. The first edition of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* was released in 1844 and published anonymously. Literary anonymity was not uncommon at the time, especially in periodical journalism. However, in the science genre, anonymity was especially rare, due to the fact that science writers typically wanted to take credit for their work in order to claim priority for their findings.

The reason for Chamber's anonymity was clear enough as soon as one began reading the text. The book was arguing for an evolutionary view of life in the same spirit as the late Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Lamarck had long been discredited among intellectuals by this time and evolutionary (or development) theories were exceedingly unpopular, except among the political radicals, materialists, and atheists.

Chambers, however, tried to explicitly distance his own theory from that of Lamarck's by denying Lamarck's evolutionary mechanism any plausibility. "Now it is possible that wants and the exercise of faculties have entered in some manner into the production of the phenomena which we have been considering; but certainly not in the way suggested by Lamarck, whose whole notion is obviously so inadequate to account for the rise of the organic kingdoms, that we only can place it with pity among the follies of the wise."<sup>[10]</sup> Additionally, his work was far more sweeping in scope than any of his predecessors. "The book, as far as I am aware," he writes in his concluding chapter, "is the first attempt to connect the natural sciences in a history of creation."<sup>[11]</sup>

Robert Chambers was certainly aware of the storm that would probably be raised at the time by his treatment of the subject, and most importantly, he did not wish to get he and his brother's publishing firm involved in any kind of scandal that could potentially ruin or severely impact their business venture. The arrangements for publication, therefore, were made through a

friend named Alexander Ireland, of Manchester. To further prevent the possibility of any unwanted revelations, Chambers only disclosed the secret to four people: his wife, his brother William, Ireland, and George Combe's nephew, Mr. Robert Cox.<sup>[12]</sup> All correspondence to and from Chambers passed through Ireland's hands first, and all letters and manuscripts were dutifully transcribed in Mrs. Chamber's hand to prevent the possibility of anyone recognizing Robert's handwriting.

By implying that God might not actively sustain the natural and social hierarchies, the book threatened the social order and could provide ammunition to Chartists and revolutionaries. Anglican clergymen / naturalists attacked the book, with the geologist Adam Sedgwick predicting "ruin and confusion in such a creed" which if taken up by the working classes "will undermine the whole moral and social fabric" bringing "discord and deadly mischief in its train." The book was liked by many Quakers and Unitarians. The Unitarian physiologist William Carpenter called it "a very beautiful and a very interesting book", and helped Chambers with

correcting later editions. Critics thanked God that the author began "in ignorance and presumption", for the revised versions "would have been much more dangerous". Nevertheless, the book was undoubtedly a sensation and quickly went through a number of new editions. *Vestiges* brought widespread discussion of evolution out of the streets and gutter presses and into the drawing rooms of respectable men and women.

## Other Activities

Chambers gave a talk on ancient beaches at the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting at Oxford in May 1847. An observer named Andrew Crombie Ramsay at the meeting reported that Chambers "pushed his conclusions to a most unwarrantable length and got roughly handled on account of it by Buckland, De la Beche, Sedgwick, Murchison, and Lyell. The last told me afterwards that he did so purposely that [Chambers] might see that reasonings in the style of the author of the *Vestiges* would not be tolerated among scientific men." On the Sunday Samuel Wilberforce,

Bishop of Oxford, used his sermon at St. Mary's Church on "the wrong way of doing science" to deliver a stinging attack obviously aimed at Chambers. The church "crowded to suffocation" with geologists, astronomers and zoologists heard jibes about the "half-learned" seduced by the "foul temptation" of speculation looking for a self-sustaining universe in a "mocking spirit of unbelief", showing a failure to understand the "modes of the Creator's acting" or to meet the responsibilities of a gentleman. Chambers denounced this as an attempt to stifle progressive opinion, but others thought he must have gone home "with the feeling of a martyr".

Near the close of autumn, 1848, Chambers allowed himself to be brought forward as a candidate for the administrative position of Lord Provost of Edinburgh. The timing was especially poor, with others seeking any means possible to try and discredit his character. His adversaries found the perfect opportunity to do so in the swirling allegations that he was the author of the much reviled *Vestiges*. William Chambers, in his *Memoir of Robert Chambers*, still sworn to secrecy despite his brother's recent passing,

makes his only mention of *Vestiges* in connection with this affair: "(Robert) might have been well assured that a rumor to the effect that he was the author of 'Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation,' would be used to his disadvantage, and that anything he might say on the subject would be unavailing."<sup>[13]</sup> Robert withdrew his candidacy in disgust.

In 1851 Chambers was one of a group of writers who joined the publisher John Chapman in reinvigorating the *Westminster Review* as a flagship of freethought and reform, spreading the ideas of evolutionism.

A year after Robert's death in 1871, his brother William published a biography under the title *Memoir of Robert Chambers; With Autobiographical Reminiscences of William Chambers*. However, the book did not reveal Robert's authorship of the *Vestiges*. Milton Millhauser, in his 1959 book *Just Before Darwin*, wrote the following about William's memoir: "The fraternal *Memoir of Robert Chambers* might have been an excellent biography had not the author been concerned to

keep the *Vestiges* secret and one or two others. Despite the author's intelligence and sympathy, such omissions inevitably produced a distorted picture" (pg. 191, note 7). The book contains some reminiscences by Robert of his early life, with the rest of the narration filled in by William.

Alexander Ireland, in 1884, issued a 12th edition of *Vestiges* with Robert Chambers finally listed as the author and a preface giving an account of its authorship. Ireland felt that there was no longer any reason for concealing the secret.

## ***Book of Days***

### *Main article Chambers Book of Days*

The *Book of Days* was Chambers's last major publication, and perhaps his most elaborate. It was a miscellany of popular antiquities in connection with the calendar, and it is supposed that his excessive labour in connexion with this book hastened his death. Two years before, the university of St Andrews had conferred upon him the degree of doctor of laws, and he was elected a member of the Athenaeum Club in

London. It is his highest claim to distinction that he did so much to give a healthy tone to the cheap popular literature which has become so important a factor in modern civilization.

## Works

### Principal Writings

- *The Kaleidoscope, or Edinburgh Literary Amusement*. October, 1821-January, 1822.
- *Illustrations of the Author of Waverley*. 1822.
- *Traditions of Edinburgh*. 1824.
- *Notices of the Most Remarkable Fires with have Occurred in Edinburgh*. 1825.
- *Walks in Edinburgh*. 1825.
- *Popular Rhymes of Scotland*. 1826.
- *Picture of Scotland*. 1827.
- *History of the Rebellion of 1745*. 1828.
- *Scottish Ballads*. 1829.
- *Scottish Songs*. 1829.
- *The Picture of Stirling*. 1830.
- *Life of King James I*. 1830.
- *Gazetteer of Scotland* (with William Chambers). 1832.
- *Scottish Jests and Anecdotes*. 1832.



- *Life of Sir Walter Scott*. 1832.
- *History of Scotland*. 1832.
- *Reekiana, or Minor Antiquities of Edinburgh*. 1833.
- *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen*. 1833-1835.
- *Life and Works of Burns* (based on Currie's edition). 1834.
- *Jacobite Memoirs of the Rebellion*. 1834.
- *History of the English Language and Literature*. 1835.
- *Poems*. 1835.
- *The Land of Burns* (with Professor John Wilson). 1840.
- *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (with Robert Carruthers). 1840.
- *History of the Rebellion of 1745*. 1840.
- *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (published anonymously). 1844.
- *Twelve Romantic Scottish Ballads*. 1844.
- *Explanations: A Sequel* (published anonymously). 1845.
- *Select Writings of Robert Chambers*, in seven volumes. 1847.
- *Ancient Sea Margins*. 1848.
- *Tracings of the North of Europe*. 1851.
- *Life and Works of Robert Burns*. 1851.
- *Tracings of Iceland and the Faroe*

*Islands*. 1856.

- *Domestic Annals of Scotland*. 1859-1861.
- *Sketch of the History of Edinburgh Theatre Royal*. 1859.
- *Memoirs of a Banking House, by Sir William Forbes* (ed. R. Chambers). 1859.
- *Edinburgh Papers*. 1861.
- *Songs of Scotland Prior to Burns*. 1862.
- Preface to Daniel Dunglas Home: *Incidents in My Life*, first series. 1863.
- *The Book of Days*. 1864.
- *Life of Smollett*. 1867.
- *The Threiplands of Fingask*. 1880.

## **Unpublished Manuscripts**

- Life and Preachings of Jesus Christ, from the Evangelists.
- A Catechism for the Young.
- Private Prayers and Meditations.
- Antiquarian Papers.
- Several papers on spiritualism.

## **Edited and Contributed to**

- *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal*. 1832 ff.
- *Chamber's Information for the People*.

1833-1835.

- *Chamber's Educational Course*. 1835 ff.

## Notes

1. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pg. 9.
2. ^ Millhauser (1959), pg. 11.
3. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pg. 56.
4. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pg. 114.
5. ^ Millhauser (1959), pg. 14.
6. ^ Millhauser (1959), pg. 18.
7. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pgs. 146, 154
8. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pg. 156.
9. ^ *Memoirs* (1872), pg. 254
10. ^ *Vestiges* (1844), pg. 231.
11. ^ *Vestiges* (1844), pg. 388.
12. ^ Ireland, "Introduction to the Twelfth Edition," in *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1884), pgs. vii-viii. Two years after the initial publication, in 1846, a Dr. Neil Arnott was also added to this tight inner circle.
13. ^ *Memoir* (1872), pg. 256.

## References

- Chambers, Robert (1844), *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, London: John Churchill

- Chambers, Robert (1845), *Explanations: A Sequel to "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation"*, London: John Churchill
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- Chambers, William (1872), *Memoir of Robert Chambers,; With Autobiographical Reminiscences of William Chambers*, New York: Scribner, Armstrong & co.
- Millhauser, Milton (1959), *Just Before Darwin: Robert Chambers and Vestiges*, Wesleyan University
- Secord, James A., ed. (1994), *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation and other Evolutionary Writings*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ISBN 0226100731 (Contains facsimiles of the 1st editions of *Vestiges* and *Explanations*)
- Secord, James A. (2001), *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, ISBN 978-0-226-74410-0

## External links

- *Vestiges of the natural history of creation, 9th ed. (1851)* from Google Books.
- *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, 10th ed. (1853)* from Google Books.
- *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, 11th ed. with a Sequel (1860)* from Google Books.
- *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, 12th ed. with a preface by Alexander Ireland (1884)* from Google Books.
- *Explanations: a sequel to "Vestiges of the natural history of creation" 2nd ed. (1846)* from Google Books.
- *Select Writings of Robert Chambers* from Google Books.
- *Memoir of Robert Chambers: with autobiographic reminiscences of William Chambers* from Google Books.
- *The Book of Days. A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection with the Calendar, Including Anecdote,*

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