

The Disencumbering (or, The Losing of John Kay)

By Johnny Rodger

The verbal noun of the main title above is an architectural term. It is given to that operation whereby city improvers, particularly those of the 19th century, sought to remove adjacent construction, seen as auxiliary, supplementary, and non-original to the architectural integrity of a principal public building. The feeling is that any particular important public building in question ought to be seen as a pure architectural object, and can, through disencumbering, be liberated from parasitic construction.

The illustration here shows a plan of Karlskirche, Vienna, before and after being 'disencumbered', when auxiliary construction was removed from around the main building and the square surrounding it redesigned to form a platonic volume carved out of the urban fabric.

The high point of 'disencumbering' was the 19th century and as an historical phenomenon, it is thus not unrelated to the grand style of Haussmanisation – that attempt to clear away medieval construction and twisted narrow streets, and to drive major, broad boulevards through the city, lined with ashlar-faced and carved bourgeois apartment blocks. Like Haussmanisation, disencumbering was a pan-European phenomenon, and its effects can be seen in the open, clear views we have of such monuments as the Milan Duomo, of Notre Dame in Paris, and of course, of Glasgow Cathedral, which latter had two asymmetrical and irregular western towers, built between the 13th-15th centuries, removed in the 1840s by Victorian formal purists. The phenomenon of disencumbering was then arguably continued into the 20th century, with the Italian fascists being amongst the most active proponents. It may always be crude to quote from Mussolini, but sometimes it is irresistible. After clearing the medieval slum of Borgo Pio away from the walls of the Vatican and opening up a view of St Peter's from the Tiber, Il Duce's comment, in its

political simplicity and clarity, is itself an example of the disencumbering aesthetic: 'The millennial monuments of our history,' he said, 'must loom gigantic in their necessary solitude.'

One early example of disencumbering, and one which is of particular interest to us here, was that which was performed on St Giles, Edinburgh. A well-known painting 'The Parliament Close and Public Chambers of Edinburgh 50 Years Since' (1855) shows a view of the church from

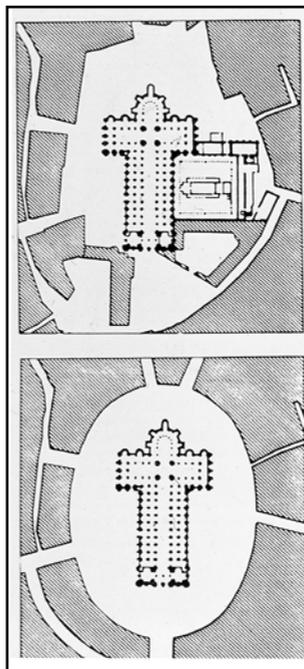
the south across a crowded Parliament Close, before the operation took place. The south side of St Giles is shown here as obscured by a ramshackle collection of 'luckenbooths' – goldsmiths' and jewellers' shops, etc. – built up against the church wall, and there is even a washing-line hung across one of the giant gothic windows.

In 1817 these buildings, and also those which crowded up to the other sides of the church (including the Old Tolbooth to the west) were removed, and the church was reduced more or less, to its present disencumbered dimensions. One interesting point about this painting is that not only was it painted some decades after those adjacent shops had been removed from around the church, but it was the joint

production of numerous artists, including Sir David Wilkie, Alexander Nasmyth, David Roberts, Clarkson Stanfield, James Wilson, and two called Frazer and Williamson.

There is however, one curious omission in the generally acknowledged roll-call of artists involved – namely John Kay.

John Kay was an artist and sometime barber who from the 1780s until his death (1826) produced hundreds of etchings of characters inhabiting Edinburgh at the time. Although Kay had been long dead before the painting was produced, reproductions of his 18th and





19th century characters are included in the crowds. Indeed they form the majority of the persons visible, presumably put there in the hope of introducing a ready-made authenticity to the scene. As it happens John Kay's barber's shop where he worked and where he hung his etchings in the window, stood itself on the south side of Parliament Close and the view shown here is substantially that (albeit from a different angle) which he would have observed from his window. But why, if authenticity is in any way the name of the artistic game here, has John Kay's name regularly been omitted or forgotten when it came to credits for this work?

It can be argued that this tacit removal of his name from artistic history is an extreme case in the treatment of John Kay and his work. He is, after all, generally acknowledged as one of the main historical sources for our knowledge of precisely how the characters – both famous and less so – of Enlightenment late 18th and early 19th century Edinburgh actually looked. In his 900 or so etchings (around 600 have been 'lost') Kay not only portrayed the ordinary people of the town – beggars, preachers, workers, soldiers, pipers, lawyers, oyster-sellers, dandies – but also many of the key intellectual figures of the Enlightenment alongside. He is for example the author of the only known likeness from life of Adam Smith. And that his etchings did indeed present us with a true 'likeness' to their models is what's more, not doubted by those who ought to have known. Robert Chambers in his *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* wrote

To speak of his portraits as caricatures is doing them signal injustice. They were the most exact and faithful likenesses

that could have been reproduced by any mode of art.

Yet it is precisely that idea of Kay as providing accurate depiction, an historical document, which seems to be the ground from which existing opinion of his lack of artistic merit has been launched. In their book on Kay published in the early 70s H & M Evans make a powerful and comprehensive case for the rehabilitation of his purely artistic reputation. But nonetheless even they feel it necessary to preface with an apology for the barber in Kay:

As documents, his prints are clearly of unique value; as works of art their appeal is less immediately obvious.

Thus when Kay is not being erased from or completely ignored by artistic history, the value of his work as art is being denied. And there is a long tradition of such denial. The 9th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says of him that he had 'little strictly artistic power' and Sir Herbert Maxwell in his history of Edinburgh says in a somewhat pot-callingly unmeritorious prose: 'Being self-taught, Kay's work is of negligible merit.' And in the recently published *Scottish Art* (2000) by Murdo MacDonald, Kay is afforded only two sentences in the whole history, and even within that tight fit the writer takes care to stress how derivative is Kay's work.

But all this denial and negativity here surely only creates in the inquisitive mind a greater hunger to see the actual work. What exactly is being dismissed repeatedly here and why? If Kay's oeuvre does indeed constitute an important historical document then is not



that merit sufficient in itself – why the need to go further and simultaneously dismiss the possibility of artistic talent into the bargain? This is Enlightenment Edinburgh, so where is the difficulty, in its rational light, in distinguishing virtues and giving due praise? Is there not, in fact, a whiff of snobbery, of class distinction, and exclusivity in these comments? And does it not appear that we are certainly no further in a general resolution and understanding of this conundrum than we were before the Evans's publication in the 1970s? Are there indeed, social reasons, no less valid and operative now than they were in the late 18th century, behind the choice to keep forgetting the artist, John Kay?

All those questions can only emphasise how important it is that his work should not only remain in the public realm in some form, but that it should be brought continually to public attention. Fortunately Sheila Szatkowski has done just that for us, by publishing a selection of 100 etchings, reproduced from the posthumous edition (published in 1837, again in 1842, and again in 1877, after which last the plates were destroyed) by Paton and Patterson. It is interesting that in Szatkowski's volume the etchings are accompanied by text which draws on the copious notes and anecdotes written by Paton and Patterson only a few years after Kay's death. Thus by adaptation and minimum modernisation of the 1837 text, Szatkowski succeeds in putting the images right back in the social context as seen by the people of that time and place. The work is put under our noses again, and we are drawn inexorably to a perusal of the social nexus, but without the intrusion of an accompanying modern key or explicatory text cruising off into questions of Kay's reputation-to-be. In that sense this small publication is liberating: it allows us to breathe in something of the authentic Edinburgh atmosphere, to meditate on the actual work and its circumstances, before obfuscation of the mark with the meaning. It's a fresh start, if you like, but the age of innocence, as ever, is short lived. The dilettante may be easily satisfied – even smug – at the idea that they find their own range mirrored in the concerns and abilities of John Kay. The rest of us are soon burdened by the phenomenon of these evidently light-hearted etchings with a guilty conscience and some awkward questions about the artist and society.

The fact is that the society to which John Kay belonged, Edinburgh at the turn of the 19th century, was undergoing some radical structural changes. The disencumbering of St Giles church, a process which Kay may have watched from his

barber's shop cum studio/display window across the square, was not an isolated architectural phenomenon, but part of a city-wide upheaval. The middle classes were not only removing a perceived undesirable clutter of structures from around the main church in Edinburgh to leave it sitting free and open in its own space, but they were clearing themselves out of the medieval town, to settle in a newly-built neo-classical town of wide streets and palace-fronted ashlar stone houses. The middle classes had, in effect, since the 1780s (when Kay had begun his artistic career) been gradually abandoning the densely populated and built-up Old Town, with its mix of all the social classes and social activities, for the social monoculture and the planned order of open streets and squares in Edinburgh New Town. Indeed the architect Archibald Elliot, who undertook the job of remodelling the new freed St Giles, was a noted designer of churches and other monuments in the New Town.

Edinburgh had grown up as a city along the escarpment of the Castle Rock, spreading down the ridge from the royal castle at the top to the royal palace at the bottom. Along the summit of this ridge was an open public space – called the High Street, but rather an elongated market place than an actual street. Other narrow lanes – called closes – ran perpendicular to the ridge down off both sides of the High Street and were densely built up with residential construction up to 11 and 12 storeys high. The city was thus densely populated, with little or no building regulation, and all classes and activities going on side by side in one small urban area. There was, of course, a form of social differentiation in terms of where in the tall buildings one was housed, in what part of the city, and what was the size of one's house. It would however, be very difficult, if not impossible to avoid casual encounters with one's neighbours of all classes when the town was so densely populated, and given that, for example, no carriages were able to travel up these narrow steep closes. At any rate, alongside a myriad other political and historical factors, this reality of close-proximity, of the cheek-by-jowl-with-one's-fellows nature of daily life in this city, is often cited as one of the conditions most favourable to the development of that intellectual and cultural flowering known as the 'Scottish Enlightenment'. As the King's chemist, Amyat, a 'most sensible and agreeable English gentleman' famously remarked on standing not 50 yards from the site of Kay's shop in a visit to the city in 1750:

Here I stand at what is called The Cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes,



take fifty men of genius and learning by the hand.

As Kay was only eight years old at the time of this English gentleman's visit, the etcher was most certainly not included in that express category of 'genius'. Had the gentleman been alive to return to that same Cross some 60 years later, he could well have discovered that by his same standard of reckoning of a genius, none at all could be found in the whole of the Old Town. For the middle classes had by that time largely decamped for their New Town. And their geniuses – men of the stamp of Hume, and Scott – had moved with them when the opportunity arose. If however, we ask why they had gone, then the answer must be a complicated one, and we do not have the space to tell the whole tale here. Old Town Edinburgh was a cramped, dirty and difficult place to live in, for sure, but the idea of building a new middle class adjunct to the medieval town was not a new one, and nor did it originate in that city. As mentioned above, the urban mechanics of 18th and 19th century New Town building – Haussmanization, disencumbering, masterplanning by competition and so on – were pan-European phenomena. The Edinbourgeoisie were simply following the precedent set by middleclassmate New Town builders in such cities as Turin, Karlsruhe, Berlin and Bath.

With Edinburgh New Town as with numerous 18th century new towns across Europe, the middle classes set out a different pattern of urban spaces from those in their original medieval town, and they established different ways of inhabiting those spaces. There were more strictly demarcated spaces set aside for the different classes (the smaller lanes for domestic servants' lodgings, for example, were only built to serve the principal inhabitants) and each house was set wider apart from its neighbours, and often with its own separate front door. There were different areas set aside for different activities – 'the genteel and well ordered arcady', as Youngson called the New Town, was to be completely residential, and have none of the noise, smell or traffic of industry or the workplace. But most interesting for us here, is that the middle classes would also nurture a

different type of art to represent and portray this new type of space they inhabited. And they would also develop new ways of displaying this art.

In the foreword to Szatkowski's new book Alexander McCall Smith makes a brief comparison of the work of Kay and that of the famous portrait painter Sir Henry Raeburn. The immediate contrast of their lives and work is striking and enlightening, but extended development of that comparison yields yet more instructive material towards an understanding of those abovementioned questions about the artist and society, and about the roles of different types of art and the different ways of displaying them.

Raeburn (1756-1823) and Kay (1742-1826) were contemporaries, both living and working in Edinburgh, and as such it is hardly surprising that they had some models in common. Both artists, for example, made portraits in their own respective media of James Hutton, the father of modern geology, of Lord Braxfield, the so-called 'hanging judge', and of Walter Scott, the novelist and poet. It is doubtful however, if both artists studied and drew from these models under entirely the same set of conditions ...

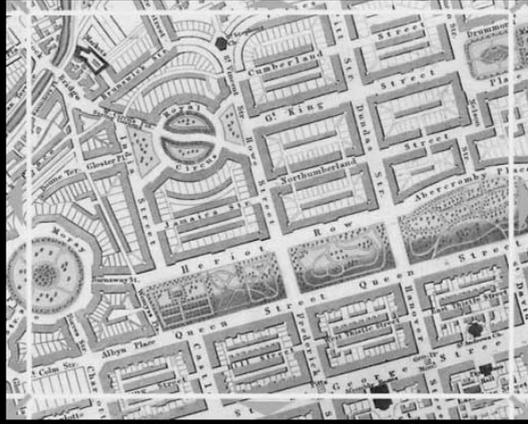
According to McCall Smith, models would pay up to 50 guineas to sit for Raeburn. Kay, by contrast, would on the one hand catch some of his models on the hop, as it were, going about their daily business; and on the other hand, as so many of his models were the poor, the ordinary and the underprivileged, then their paying to be portrayed by him would be out of the question. Thus not only did the subjects of Kay's etchings often neither pay to be drawn nor purchase a completed work, but often they did not give him permission, nor even, ultimately approve of his drawing them. This, as we shall see below, got Kay into some trouble. But, for the moment, let's concentrate

on making the comparison of Kay and Raeburn through the most obvious and direct of routes: an examination of their work.

Two composite sets of images have been prepared and appear on the page opposite.

The first set of images shows a (rather late) part of the plan of Edinburgh New Town, with below





it two oil paintings by Raeburn.

The second set shows an engraving of the Old Town as a huddle of buildings stretching up to the Castle Rock (by Lacey in 1829), and below two etchings by John Kay.

The street plan in the first set, showing the ordered New Town with its regular street fronts, built of course, of regulated building materials and to uniform heights, stands in contrast to the vernacular jumble of the Old Town shown below. The production of this homogenous, refined, clean (industry and trade were banned by law from the New Town) hierarchical and regularised space was a project of the Edinburgh middle classes from the mid-18th century on. It is a formalised and socially exclusive space planned by and for people like those portrayed in oils here by Raeburn: namely Sir Walter Scott and Mrs Rattray. As seen here Raeburn's New Town middle class models could well be said to be typically portrayed as 'loom(ing) gigantic in their necessary solitude'.

In the second set of images we see the Old Town with its crammed irregular forms and shapes of its buildings: an ad hoc collection of public, commercial, residential, refined and decrepit, and monumental buildings. Right above the middle of the picture can be seen the crown of St Giles. Kay worked thus, right in the middle of this crowded Old Town, and his etchings often show busy street scenes with a mix of classes, sexes and occupations – the 'human comedy' as McCall Smith calls it. In one image here we have a man cudgelling another, while two well-to-do ladies look on. In the other we see a lawyer, Hamilton Bell, carrying a vintner's boy on his back for a bet, while two oyster sellers walk by in the street. There are heterogeneous, multiple and intimate relations across classes, occupations and gender presented in Kay's etchings: that's not to say that there is no social order in the Old Town as he represents it, but it is a complicated, and inclusive order, just like that of the architecture in the Old Town.

It is clear with Raeburn's work that the art approved, commissioned and purchased by the middle classes of the late 18th and early 19th centuries reinforced the sense of social exclusivity which they found for themselves in the New Town. By contrast the heterogeneous social and civic life as represented in the art of John Kay was gradually disappearing as the middle classes left the Old Town for the New. Those middle classes had their own galleries for display of their art built on the edge of the

New Town – the first, the RSA, a Doric temple completed by Playfair in 1826. This was too late for Raeburn and Kay as living artists, but nonetheless the effects of the grand project of New Town building were felt long before in the Old Town. The last Society ball was held in the Old Town in 1817, and then by 1833, with a change in Town Council, Edinburgh was found to be bankrupt. An isolated and resentful underclass had been abandoned on the penniless rock of the Old Town while the 'better off' had built themselves a 'genteel and well ordered arcady' to the north.

John Kay's shop on the south side of Parliament Close (latterly Parliament Square) where he posted his etchings in the window may once have been at the hub of the town. But as the New Town developed and grew in importance, the centrality of Parliament Close and the High Street to a broad cross-section of Edinburgh social life dwindled. Raeburn's oils may well have hung in many of the drawing rooms and galleries of the New Town, but during at least the first three decades of his artistic career Kay's etchings were unlikely to be seen there. That's not to say Kay's work did not attract the attention of the well-connected and the figures of authority and the ruling classes. What attracted their interest however was not simply or only the fine or clever execution of the work, but the fact that as an 'independent' man (Kay had been left an annuity by a gentleman customer of his barber's shop in 1784) he was perceived by some as a loose social cannon, as it were, a maverick taking liberty to disrespect the new-found and developing social space and standing of some well-to-do citizens. Kay had indeed not only been threatened, but actually attacked – verbally, physically, and also by law suit – by some of the characters he had etched. One magistrate, John Spottiswood, who had been drawn in an image of the balloon flight of Lunardi in Edinburgh in the 1780s, objected to being shown alongside people he evidently considered to be his social inferiors. Kay, said Spottiswood, 'ought to be horsewhipped'. He continued: 'It is one of the horriblest things on earth to put me on a level with a caddy.' In another etching from 1796, a gentleman is shown berating Kay in the latter's own shop, with a ribbon from the former's mouth containing the words: 'You're a damn'd caricature painter! I've a good mind to give you a damn'd threshing!' Szatkowski speaks in her book of Kay actually being 'cudgelled at least once'. But perhaps the most curious attack came in court from the lawyer, Hamilton Bell. Bell is shown above in the composite images as the man carrying a boy on his back. Despite the fact



that Bell had indeed carried a tavern-keeper's boy thus in a race for a wager, he took exception to Kay's representation of him in such a socially compromised position and prosecuted. Needless to say, when the judges threw the case out, Kay took revenge by composing an etching of the court proceedings, with Bell himself shown 'black in the face with anger'.

But does this tale of two artists and two cities consist simply and purely in the crudest of juxtapositions: viz. drawing rooms and catalogues for one, and courtrooms and cudgels for the other? Or are there, in fact, more subtle and telling comparisons to be drawn? In *The Drouth* issue 20 (Image) we published reproductions of some Raeburn portraits alongside a commentary on a Raeburn exhibition by R L Stevenson, written almost 60 years after Raeburn's death. Stevenson was particularly fascinated by the portrait of the judge Lord Braxfield, and went on in later life to use Braxfield as the model for his gruff, captious and overbearing father in the unfinished novel *Weir of Hermiston*. His comment on the painting of this reactionary old character, also known as the 'hanging judge', gives us a keen, unexpected insight to the artistic sensibility at work:

So sympathetically is the character conceived by the portrait painter, that it is hardly possible to avoid some movement of sympathy on the part of the spectator. And sympathy is a thing to be encouraged, apart from humane considerations, because it supplies us with the materials for wisdom. It is probably more instructive to entertain a sneaking kindness for any unpopular person, and among the rest for Lord Braxfield, than to give way to perfect raptures of moral indignation against his abstract vices.

When we turn to inspect Kay's etching of the same model, we find, to our surprise, that the very same emotions are stirred in us again, and that Stevenson's description of Raeburn's portrait would fit as well for Kay's. It's surprising at first that Kay, whose work, as H & M Evans

put it, gives us 'fair indication of sympathy with "left wing" ideas', and who clearly put great care and a promotional spirit into his portrait of the political radical and agitator Thomas Muir, should be so evidently congenial with Braxfield. It was the latter after all, who had sentenced Muir to be deported to Botany Bay in 1793 (the same year both their etchings were completed). And surely Braxfield, with his sneering and cynical put-downs and one-liners from the bench, a man who – in typical representations at any rate – seemed to gloat with an almost medieval glee over the punishment of the unorthodox, was ripe material for social satire and caricature.

Yet Kay forbore. And if his portrait has more in common with Raeburn's than their respective social standing, histories and inclinations would have led us to imagine could be the case, then perhaps the truth is that we can read into Stevenson's criticism a comment equally on the 'zeitgeist' of that era, as much as about one particular work. Was not that age of Enlightenment in Edinburgh characterised and indeed made great across all sections of society by its artistic and intellectual outlook, by 'sympathy' as much for Smith with his 'Moral Sentiments' and Hume with his 'Human Nature', to McKenzie with his 'Man of Feeling', Burns his 'Mouse' his 'Hare' and



his 'Brithers', and Kay with his etchings? But equally Braxfield and Kay must both have known that the morally self-sufficient, densely packed, cohesive, multiculture that was Edinburgh Old Town was coming to an end as the middle classes found a new space free from the clamour of those they now considered socially inferior, parasitic, and even to be the 'horriblest things'. Just as Braxfield's alleged smug and axiomatic moral sententiousness would no longer span the Nor Loch-wide gap between the rulers and the ruled (the middle classes were, for example, rapidly dropping his and the lower classes' native Scots language), so an artist hoping to exploit and illustrate the tensions caused by the new social spacing would have to bring some keen and subtle techniques to bear.

This brings us to the question of Kay's



designation as a 'caricaturist'. It is one point where we have to agree with Robert Chalmers' comment in his *Dictionary*, and take issue with Szatkowski's otherwise excellent and timely publication. *Capital Caricatures* is only the title, for sure, and as a 'taster' – as the publisher describes it – for the full republished facsimile of the 1837 edition, we recognise that something catchy is called for up front. It has been a long established custom, *pace* Chalmers, to refer to Kay's work as 'caricatures'; but if we are to have a revival – and Szatkowski's laudable efforts could certainly provoke one – then what is the point if there is no re-evaluation? It's true that Kay did sometimes choose to draw the physically abnormal and freakish, to contrast the abruptly different social orders and often employ exaggeration of form and content in the way of a caricaturist. But he used a wide range of other techniques of representation in his art. We may ask, given all said in the final part of the comparison with Raeburn immediately above, if the etching of Braxfield can be considered a caricature? And what about that of Adam Smith, that of Thomas Paine, of William Wilson, Francis Jeffrey, or Geordie Syme?

It's notable whatsmore that every modern writer you care to read on the subject – be it Sheila Szatkowski, Hilary and Mary Evans, McCall Smith, Nick Prior or Alan Taylor – every one, will make a comparison of the work of Kay with that of Gillray and Rowlandson. It is *de rigueur*, that is to say, not simply to conjure up the aquatinted spectre of that pair of Georgian satirists, but in almost the same breath to dismiss the possibility of comparison there given the coloured temper of their work. And indeed both the much larger and much more open society they operated in, and its more wide ranging political and royal intrigues, and the different methods and techniques of composition within which Gillray and Rowlandson worked, are immediately and strikingly different from those of Kay. Both those London artists also began their artistic careers long after Kay had been launched on his, so the question of their influence on him could never have been a straightforward one to say the least. Why then is this comparison always the one that is raised if, in effect, it is always

immediately rejected?

Could it be that this knee-jerk 'Gillray and Rowlandson' is, in itself, a form of metaphorical cudgelling? What we have is the continual application here of a sub-, or at any rate an inferior artistic, genre label to Kay's work regardless of its relevance; and the standard raising of a comparison in that genre, only, by the repeated admission of the authors themselves, to dismiss it immediately as offering no worthwhile insight to the work in question. A violence is done to Kay here with this phony crit. His art is forced by a double bluff back into a minor corner, and acknowledgement of its validity and worth in its own artistic right, and on a par with any other genre, is denied.



Kay's work thus encounters a similar prejudice which writers in non-standard, non-bourgeois forms – writers such as James Kelman and Tom Leonard – claim to face. Kelman made reference to this type of exclusion in his acceptance speech at his Booker prize winning presentation in 1994. Unfortunately coverage of the speech, on BBC television, was cut off after 30 seconds, but amongst what he did say, was:

A couple of weeks ago a feature writer for a quality newspaper suggested that the use of the term 'culture' was inappropriate in relation to my words, that the characters peopling my pages were 'preculture' or was it 'primeval'? This was explicit, generally it isn't. But, as Tom Leonard pointed out more than 20 years ago, the gist of the argument amounts to the following, that vernaculars, patois, slangs, dialects, gutter-languages might well have a place in the realms of comedy (and the frequent references to Billy Connolly or Rab C Nesbit substantiate this) but they are inferior linguistic forms and have no place in literature. And a priori any writer who engages in such so-called language is not really engaged in literature at all.

To make the connection to the work of Kay and the prejudice he faced, and continues to face,



we need only substitute 'drawings' for 'words' and 'etchings' for 'pages' in the first sentence. In the third sentence, try putting 'caricature' for 'comedy', 'Gillray and Rowlandson' for 'Billy Connolly and Rab C Nesbit', and 'art' for 'literature'. And so on. The reaction, the attempt to shove Kay, like Kelman and Leonard, back into the 'pre-cultural' corner with the comics (in both senses of the word) is substantially the same. It might indeed be interesting to ask if Kelman or Leonard have ever been actually as well as metaphorically 'cudgelled' as a direct result of their work. But why should this be, why is there this violent reaction to the non-bourgeois work? Again Kelman speaks up, and *mutatis mutandis*, we can again see the application to John Kay:

Writers have to develop the habit of relying on themselves. It's as if there's a massive KEEP OUT sign hoisted above every area of literature. This is an obvious effect of the hopeless elitism referred to earlier. But there are other reasons. The very idea of literary art as something alive and lurking within reach of ordinary women and men is not necessarily the sort of idea those who control the power in society will welcome with open arms. It's naïve to expect otherwise. Literature is nothing when it isn't being dangerous in some way or another and those in positions of power will always be suspicious of anything that could conceivably affect their security.

The language of Kay's art was not acceptable to some people in his time – witness actual cudgellings; but nor even to those evidently 'sympathetic' to him is it acceptable now – witness metaphorical cudgellings. Yet clearly it would not be true to say that there has never been a change in his status and acceptability. Even by 1811, Kay was actually exhibiting his work in the New Town with the Edinburgh Associated Artists. He continued doing so for several years, and then by 1822, he exhibited with the Institution for the Encouragement of the Arts in Scotland. The 'drawing rooms' of the New Town seemed to be beckoning.

But does this mean that there was some let-up by the New Town middle classes in their quest to escape the crowded and mixed social conditions which pertained, and had been all too evident in Kay's images, and had been considered by some to be amongst 'the horriblest things on earth'? Not according to Nick Prior, who in his excellent essay 'Etching the City: Edinburgh, Urbanism, and

the Caricatures (*oops!*) of John Kay' argues that the etchings only appeared safe once a decent chronological as well as physical space was put between the middle classes and the Old Town. Of the display of Kay's etchings at these New Town exhibitions Prior says:

His etchings, as with other drawings, photographs and visual miscellanea, were steadily incorporated as quaint nostalgia for a museofied Old Town past. Busy thoroughfares, antiquated housing and mingling crowds were transformed into picturesque images, evaluated by collectors as signs of a romantic historical past and contrasted to the bright new modernity ... Kay's work ... was finally severed from the space that gave it its ambiguous flavour and inserted into the Romantic order of things that was becoming Scotland's hallmark under the influence of Sir Walter Scott.

The New Town, that is to say, had by the second decade of the 19th century achieved so secure a physical separation and purity that no more 'actual' cudgellings of Kay were necessary. This sense of 'achievement' is reinforced in Youngson, the historian's (*The Making of Classical Edinburgh*) assertion some 150 years later that the beauty of Edinburgh as a city lies in the 'visible conjunction but physical separation of the Old and New Towns'. The middle classes can now view Kay's work without feeling the threat of undesirable social encounters.

Kay, however, like Kelman and Leonard, was not about to surrender to 'those in positions of power', and kept on drawing until he died in his 80s. He keeps his barber's shop in the Old Town and would neither conform to new middle class proprieties in terms of his background, nor in terms of his continuing interests and operation. He will not grant the bourgeoisie the free space they desire, unburdened by uncomfortable social realities. We could though, never say of the mixed, heterogeneous society of Old Edinburgh that we see in some of his prints, that it was in any way idyllic or prelapsarian. There was too much filth, disease, poverty and dilapidation to make any such claim sustainable – we need only think of Johnson saying to Boswell as they scurried home of an evening: 'I can smell you in the dark' to be assured of some nasty realities. What can be said nonetheless, is that Kay's early etchings belong to an era in which the middle classes were still, socially and spatially speaking, and only just, predisencumbered.

