Concerning Book Printing in Edinburgh, 1507-1600.

The art of printing has long been one of the largest industries in the city of Edinburgh. Its first introduction into the Modern Athens was in the year 1507, when Walter Chepman and Andro Myllar, both burgesses of the city, obtained from King James IV. a royal privilege to establish a press there. The original patent, dated 15th September, 1507, was discovered about one hundred years ago in the archives of the Register House. Chepman and Myllar established their printing press in what was then called the Southgait, but which is now and has been for many generations known as the Cowgate, at the foot of Blackfriars-wynd, which is now designated Blackfriars-street, the wynd having disappeared, and a fairly broad street having taken its place. The first publications that issued from their press consisted of a collection of pamphlets, chiefly metrical romances and ballads, in the year 1508, of which an imperfect copy is to be found in the Advocates' Library. This historical treasure is said to have been discovered in Ayrshire in 1785, and was presented in 1788 by its owner, the late Mr. Alston, of Glasgow, to the library. The late Mr. David Laing, LL.D., reprinted these pamphlets in a handsome quarto volume, which was published in 1827. The work had been begun thirteen years before, but various difficulties intervened before it was properly accomplished.

In 1509-10 the same firm also produced the "Scottish Service Book, including the Legends of the Scottish Saints," commonly called "The Breviary of Aberdeen." A beautiful copy of this scarce book in two volumes, 8vo, printed in red and black, is to be seen in the Edinburgh University Library. This work was intended to take the place in Scotland of the Sarum Breviary—or "Usum Sarum" in England—as the book of service for the Church. In King James IV.'s patent to Chepman & Myllar it is specifically mentioned as a work to be done by them. Only four copies are now known to exist.

Walter Chepman was a man of substance in England. He was a favourite of King James IV., and was frequently engaged by His Majesty to conduct his correspondence, and was entrusted with the king's signet. He was a shrewd man of business, and possessed considerable wealth. He held the office of Dean of Guild in 1514-15, and received special marks of favour from King James V.

During the last year of King James IV.'s reign, Chepman erected an aisle on the south side of St. Giles' Church, when Gavin Douglas was provost of the same. He endowed an altar, so that prayers might be regularly said for the salvation of the king, queen, himself, and his first and second wives. He also endowed a mortuary chapel of the Holy Cross in memory of King James IV., for the purpose of prayers being said, not only on behalf of those already mentioned, but for the souls of the nobles and the king's faithful subjects who fell at Flodden fifteen years before. Shortly thereafter (in 1532 or 1533) Chepman died, and was buried in his own aisle. The late Lord Provost William Chambers, LL.D., succeeded in discovering the tomb of Scotland's first printer, and dedicated one of the aisles to the memory of Chepman.

Regarding Myllar, his partner in business, comparatively little is known. It has been ascertained that works printed by him, or bearing his imprint, are to be found several years before King James IV.'s patent to the Edinburgh firm of which he was a member. Though a Scotsman, his books were chiefly published in France. There is no evidence to show that he was himself a practical printer, although he might have had a certain amount of technical knowledge, acquired abroad at Rouen and other places made famous at the time by their typographical achievements.

Although for many years after the introduction of printing into Scotland, the works issued from the Edinburgh press were necessarily few and restricted, the samples of early printing that have come down to us are most excellent specimens of typography, no less in the preserved brilliancy of the colours (usually black and red) than in the extreme accuracy of the text.

The next printer of any note who appeared on the scene was Thomas Davidson, born in Aberdeenshire, "upon the waterside of Dee." In 1541 he was appointed, along with James Bannatyne, official searcher of all merchandise coming into the country by sea. During the same year he was selected by the lord clerk-registrar of the day, Sir James Foulis, of Collington, to print several Acts of King James V. These were issued very early in the following year. He began business after Chepman's death. His printing-house is described as being "above the Nether Bow, on the north syde of the gait." Among other works which issued from his press may be mentioned "The History and Croniklis of Scotland; compit and newly correcitit be the Reuerend and Noble Clerke, Maister Hector Böece. Translated laitly be Maister John Bellenden. Impressit in Edinburgh, be Thomas Davidson (1536), dwelling fornent the Freye Wynd." He also produced "The Nevv Actis And Constitutionis Of Parliament Maid Be The Rycht Excellent Prince Iames the Fift King Of Scottis (1540)" folio. Only two copies of these are known to exist. One of them is in the Advocates' Library, and the other is to be found in the Wodhull Library. Davidson also printed during the same year another edition of his History and Chronicles of Scotland, as well as the "Whole Works of Sir David Lindsay." He received a patent as king's printer in the same year, and during the following (1541) he got a licence to print the Acts of Parliament (Impressor Regni).

Robert Lekpreuk may be mentioned as the next famous Edinburgh printer. By stress of circumstances he was obliged, in 1571, to leave Edinburgh and settle for a time in Stirling. He took his printing plant with him, but little work was done. He afterwards took up his abode in St. Andrews, where for several years he conducted a printing press in that ancient city. Here he remained until 1573, when he returned to Edinburgh, where, during January, he issued a poetical tract, without first having received a licence from the Town
COUNCIL. The Act of 1551, anent printers, passed by the fifth Parliament of Queen Mary, which enjoined "Prenters suld prent nathing without license," was put in force. His property was confiscated, and he was imprisoned within Edinburgh Castle. He must have been detained there for seven or eight years. Nothing seems to be known about him again until 1581. He appears to have eventually lived and died in comparative poverty.

Thomas Bassandynye has next to be noticed. He was born in Scotland, and educated in Antwerp. His name will for ever be associated with his beautiful folio Bible, a most excellent copy of which, in good preservation, is to be seen in the Edinburgh Public Library. There is also another copy, though not quite so good, in the Advocates' Library. Bassandynye was a burgess of Edinburgh. He acquired his knowledge of typography abroad. He is known to have been engaged in the art in Leyden and Paris about the middle of the century. He came under the censure of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1568) in consequence of liberties he had taken in printing the Book of Psalms, and was four years thereafter convicted of treason by taking part with the rebels and traitors. His goods and chattels were declared to be escheat. He did not, however, remain long under the ban of the Government, for the Regent Morton granted him a remission on payment of £66 13s. 4d. He became eventually associated with Alexander Arbuthnot, also a burgess of Edinburgh, who on the 7th March, 1574-5, made overtures to the General Assembly for liberty to print the above Bible, which is now so well known as "the Bassandynye Bible." The work took several years to complete. It was not until the middle of 1579 that it was finished. It was the first Bible printed in Scotland, and its sale had to be forced. The Privy Council enacted that each householder worth 300 merks of yearly rent, and all yeomen and burgesses worth £500 in land and goods, shall possess a Bible and Psalmbook in the vulgar tongue, under a penalty of £10 sterling. Bassandynye died before its completion. His printing house was in the Nether Bow, nearly opposite John Knox's house. The date of his death is stated to be 18th October, 1577. He left considerable means, which was distributed in terms of his will. He was also the possessor of what at that time would be considered a valuable library.

Bassandynye's partner, Arbuthnot, continued to carry on the business. This is to be found by a reference to several works which were afterwards issued from his press. Among the more notable of these is "Buchanan's History of Scotland, printed at Edinburgh by Alexander Arbuthnot in 1582," and the "Buik of Alexander the Great." He died on the 1st day of September, 1585.

Henry Charteris appears to have begun business as a printer in Edinburgh in 1580. He was a burgess of the city, and for several years was a member of the Town Council and a magistrate of the burgh. He printed chiefly religious works and sermons. He died on the 26th August, 1599, and was succeeded by one of his sons (Robert). He left the business to his eldest son, Henry, who was at the time one of the Regents of the University of Edinburgh. He afterwards became principal of the University. He, of course, did not see his way to accept his father's gift, but handed it over to Robert.

The next printer of note in Edinburgh was Thomas Vautoillier, a refugee Huguenot, and a man of considerable taste in his profession. He was a Protestant, and left his native country for England. In 1564 he was admitted a member of the Stationers' Company of London. Six years thereafter he established his press in Blackfriars district, and obtained some notoriety in consequence of his having been fined for printing without licence "Special and chosen Sermons of D. Martin Luther." He eventually became the friend of George Buchanan, whose influence with the king and clergy was exercised on Vautoillier's behalf. When he came to Edinburgh he received orders for "buiks" for the royal family. This seems to have caused great jealousy among the burgesses of the city. At this time Vautoillier's wife conducted his press in London. Eventually, however, he got his press established in Edinburgh, and he had the honour of printing the first of King James VI.'s published works, "The Essayes of a Prentice in the Divine Art of Poisie." He remained in Edinburgh only for a brief period, having returned to London in 1586. He died two years thereafter.

It may be proper to mention the names of John Story (believed to have been in the employment of Chepmann and Mylliar), John Scott (or Skott), about whose identity some difference of opinion prevails; John Ross, who was in business about the time of Bassandynye; and Robert Smyth, who began business in 1599. The last-mentioned might be said to have flourished in the next century, while the works of the others were not of such importance as to be classed with the printers already referred to.

One other Edinburgh printer is deserving of notice, viz., Robert Waldegrave. Originally an Englishman, having been born in the county of Worcestershire, he established two presses in London in 1583. He seems to have come to grief there in a variety of ways. The Star Chamber having pronounced a decree against him, he had to fly the country. This was the result of his having printed several very clever seditious tracts. He was for some time resident in Rochelle; but in 1590 his press was fully established in Edinburgh. He then received the appointment of king's printer. One of his finest specimens of typography is "The Lawes and Actes of Parliament made be King James the First, and his Successors Kings of Scotland: Visied, collected and extracted forth of the Register. At Edinburgh, Imprinted be Robert VValdegraue, prenter to the Kings Majestie, 15 Martii, anno dom. 1597." When King James VI. succeeded to the English throne, and left Edinburgh for London, Waldegrave was not long in following. He died in 1604, his last Edinburgh book being printed in 1603.

These are the chief Edinburgh printers who flourished during the first century of the existence of printing in Scotland. It cannot fail to have been observed in this narrative how the art of printing was carefully conserved to favoured persons, either by a patent from the Crown on the one hand, or a licence from the Magistrates and Town Council on the other.

JAMES COLSTON.