



Chapter 6

A city of remembrance and inspiration

The literary life of Edinburgh remains vibrant, with contemporary publishers and literature organisations thriving alongside historical institutions. The city’s history is steeped in literary associations, and several of the streets and their inhabitants have inspired and featured in classic works of literature.

In one square mile in the historic centre of the city – the Old Town – is an area that for more than 500 years has formed the nucleus of Scotland’s literary activity. From Holyrood Palace, the site of Scotland’s first printing press, to the Mercat Cross, home of the first lending library, through the myriad of closes in Canongate and around the Royal Mile that housed literary societies, libraries and publishing houses, the history of literature seems very much alive.

In the same fertile ground where the Scottish Enlightenment was cultivated 250 years earlier, a new ‘Literature Quarter’ is growing. Organisations such as the National Library of Scotland, the Scottish Poetry Library, Scottish Storytelling Centre, Scottish Book Trust, Edinburgh University Library, Central Library, Canongate Books, the Saltire Society, the Writers’ Museum and Makar’s Court, make up the heart of Edinburgh’s city of literature.

Opposite
Greyfriars Bobby, who inspired the
novel of the same name by Eleanor
Atkinson



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1. Holyrood Palace, site of Scotland's first printing press,
2. Walter Scott Monument, Princes Street

There are many symbols of Edinburgh's rich literary history visible in the city today, from plaques and statues to streets that still bear the names of those honoured for their literary achievements. In punctuating the city with their presence these testaments to literature-past colour our present environment.

Edinburgh's monument to Walter Scott is, at 60 metres high, the largest in the world to a literary figure. Edinburgh is unique in naming its main rail terminal, Waverley Station, after a novel. And another famous literary son is honoured with a monument atop Calton Hill – the Burns Memorial, and a stained glass window in St Giles Cathedral, dedicated to the 'poet of humanity'. The magnificent Greek Temple that shares Calton Hill was built in honour of Dugald Stewart, an important contributor to the Enlightenment.

Walk through Princes Street Gardens, and you'll be joined by a host of literary figures. A serene grove of trees enclosed by a stone wall pays tribute to Robert Louis Stevenson; a statue to Allan Ramsay stands in the Gardens before his distinctive 'Goose Pie' house; John Wilson, aka Christopher North, the sharp-tongued contributor to Blackwood's, stands as a statue, as does Adam Black, sometime publisher of the *Edinburgh Review*.

Greyfriars Kirkyard, Canongate Graveyard and Old Calton Burial Ground stand as different tributes entirely to past greats of the literary world. The pauper's grave of Robert Fergusson, later given a headstone by Robert Burns, lies with that of Adam Smith in Canongate Graveyard.



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Greyfriars is the final resting place of William Creech, Allan Ramsay and William Smellie, whilst David Hume, William Blackwood and Archibald Constable lie interred at Old Calton.

In a recent development, contemporary poets are celebrated in Edinburgh Park on the outskirts of the city. Twelve herms, or bronze heads, are on display, accompanied by a biographical note and poem. The public art programme also includes an award-winning poetry bus shelter.

Edinburgh: fuel for the creative mind

The true stories – and rumoured ones – of Edinburgh’s colourful inhabitants have inspired writers for centuries. The built fabric, the urban landscape, the green spaces and the residents of the city are woven into many works.

James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson both wrote acclaimed novels whose central theme was duality. Deacon William Brodie was their inspiration. By day, he was a respected citizen, elected Deacon Councillor. But at night he was a gambler and a thief. His exposure following a failed robbery came as a great shock to the city. Brodie was hanged in Edinburgh on gallows he himself had designed as a master craftsman. Muriel Spark’s heroine, Miss Jean Brodie, was created as a descendant of the Deacon and found herself torn between conflicting desires.



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- 3. Allan Ramsay statue, Princes Street Gardens
- 4. Greyfriars Kirkyard, resting place of many key literary figures
- 5. Edinburgh Castle atop the Mound



No Sculpturd Marble here nor pompous lay
No Storied Urn nor animated Bust
This Simple Stone directs Pale Scotia's way
To pour her Sorrows o'er her Poets Dust

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1. Calton Hill with its striking memorials
2. The epitaph to Robert Fergusson written by Robert Burns

Other grisly stories have inspired over the centuries. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Body Snatcher* and Dylan Thomas's *The Doctor and the Devil* drew inspiration from the notorious duo of serial killers, Burke and Hare, who killed 15 people and then supplied their bodies for medical research.

The murder of Mary Queen of Scots' secretary and confidant David Rizzio at Holyrood stirred Rafael Sabatini to write *The Night of the Holyrood*, the creation of Algernon Swinburne's *Bothwell* and an opera, *Rizzio*, by Charles Dibdin.

The famous Porteous Riots of Edinburgh form the backdrop to one of Scotland's greatest novels, Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*. The riot centred around Captain John Porteous who executed a popular young man for smuggling. During public protests at the execution he ordered his men to open fire, killing nine citizens. Though he was found guilty of murder, he was later reprieved, but lost his life to a furious mob that hanged him anyway.

A more poignant tale inspired the novel *Greyfriars Bobby* by Eleanor Atkinson, later made into a film by Disney. Bobby, a Skye terrier, was the faithful companion of a shepherd named Jock Gray who died in 1853 and was buried in Greyfriars Churchyard. The dog refused to leave his master's graveside until his own death 14 years later.



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It's not just the people of Edinburgh that have inspired – the city itself has impassioned writers. The twisted seams of Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crag helped James Hutton explain his *Theory of the Earth* and provided the setting for many novels, from Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* to *The Lost World* of Arthur Conan Doyle. Mary Shelley set *Frankenstein* in the heart of Edinburgh, Charles Dickens praised it, and Ian Fleming sent James Bond to Fettes College after an indiscretion with a lady's maid at Eton. Another Edinburgh school, St Trinneans, inspired cartoonist Ronald Searle's series of books about a disreputable school for girls which in turn led to the classic British films of the 1950s.

The celebrated First World War poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen will forever be associated with Edinburgh's Craiglockhart Military Hospital, now part of the campus of Napier University. Their friendship at Craiglockhart led them to produce work that had a profound impact on English poetry.

Taverns and bars have always been a gathering place for literary figures. Whilst Burns favoured the Anchor Tavern, home of the Crochallan Fencibles drinking club, twentieth century figures such as Hugh MacDiarmid haunted Milnes Bar in Rose Street. And the true Edinburgh Detective John Rebus, the creation of Ian Rankin, made the Oxford Bar famous. Visitors to the city can learn a great deal about Edinburgh's literary life, and its bars, on The Scottish Literary Pub Tour, an entertaining introduction to writers connected with the city, from Burns to Irvine Welsh.



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3. Robert Fergusson's grave in Canongate Kirkyard
4. St Giles Cathedral, with its stained glass window dedicated to Burns
5. Oxford Bar, Young Street, Edinburgh, haunt of Detective John Rebus



Calton Hill, Edinburgh