

Thomas Allan of Lauriston 1777-1833

Banker, Newspaper Proprietor, Property Developer, Mineralogist

Writing in his *Journal* in 1845, Henry Lord Cockburn reminisced that in his youth:

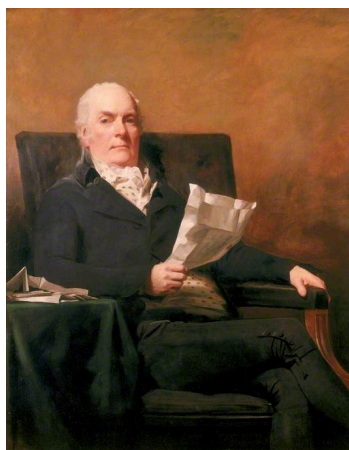
Lauriston was a bare solitary keep, fenced from the farmers' cattle by a crumbling Galloway dyke, with scarcely a comrade tree....A recent owner....made a great addition, and, if he had not been scolded out of his intention, would have removed the old tower; but he planted some trees and cherished evergreens.¹



John Clerk of Eldin, *Lauriston Castle*, National Galleries of Scotland

Cockburn's memory slightly failed him as he named the owner as Robert Allan. In fact he was Robert's father Thomas Allan who purchased Lauriston Castle, not without some hassle, on 11 November 1823 from Francis Law.

Thomas Allan was born on 17 July 1777, only son of Robert Allan and Margaret Learmonth and brother of four surviving sisters, Agnes, Janet or Jessy, Helen and Catherine. His father Robert Allan, merchant and insurance broker moved into banking with his business partner David Steuart and served on the jury at the trial of Deacon Brodie. He also became the proprietor of the newspaper the *Caledonian Mercury*.



Henry Raeburn, *Robert Allan*, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums

¹ Henry Cockburn, *Journal, being a continuation of the Memorials of his Time*, Vol. II (Edinburgh, 1874), pp. 144-5.

The marriage record of Robert Allan and Margaret Learmonth, daughter of merchant John Learmonth, placed Robert in New Greyfriars parish and Margaret in College Church parish, the area between the current Netherbow Centre and the east part of the Waverley station where Trinity College Church and Hospital stood. The baptismal records of Agnes, Jessy, Thomas and a non-surviving sister Mary, site them in the parish of the Old Church, part of St Giles which at this time also contained the Tolbooth, East or New Kirk, and West St Giles' Kirks. The Old Church parish lay on the south side of the High Street below the Tron. The banking firm of Allan and Steuart occupied premises at 11 Royal Exchange, High Street.



James Grant, *Old and New Edinburgh*

Thomas attended the High School of Edinburgh then situated in High School Yards, probably being taught at first by William Cruikshank for three years in class sizes comprising from 94 to 107 boys. Scholars then progressed to the class of the Rector, Alexander Adam where educational emphasis centred on the teaching of classical Latin with principles of Greek and Geography added for the better scholars. The boys did not attend classes on Sundays and had a six weeks' vacation in autumn; 'play days' being confined to Saturday afternoons in winter and Wednesday and Saturday afternoons in summer—but only for boys who had been attentive during the week. It seems unlikely that Thomas' early interest in mineralogy came from his school lessons.



James Grant, *The High School, Old and New Edinburgh*

When David Steuart, Robert Allan's partner, became Lord Provost in 1780 he withdrew from the business and was later instrumental in setting up the Chamber of Commerce of which Robert Allan became a director. At some point after his schooling Thomas Allan joined his father's company and he certainly attended a meeting of the Company of Merchants on 12 December 1793. Robert Allan also acted as the agent for the Sun Fire Insurance Company, Writers' Court and in 1790 he bought the *Caledonian Mercury*, listed in the Street Directories as being in Fishmarket Close but later as having premises in Craig's Close entered from 265 High Street. According to the baptismal record of Catherine Allan, by 1786 the family had moved to the parish of St Andrew in the New Town; Robert being ordained as an elder in St Andrew's Church in 1785. The 1794 Street Directory has Robert residing at 20 George Street and he certainly paid his window, servant and inhabited houses taxes during the 1790s. In January/February 1789, however, he had feued land for a house in Queen Street, the adjoining plot having been feued by David Steuart 10 years previously. 28 and 29 Queen Street were subsequently built as a pair and in No 28 Thomas Allan is first encountered through the entries in his sister Jessie's journals.



1799 proved to be a momentous year for the Allan family as Mrs Allan died in the George Street house a few days after the marriage of her eldest daughter Agnes to George Ranken a surgeon with the East India Company. The Rankens subsequently departed for India. Jessie wrote frequent letters to her sister but as she thought these could easily go astray, she decided to supplement them with a series of notebooks describing day to day affairs and often added to by her father and later, after her marriage in 1803, by her husband John Harden. Written between 1801 and 1811 these are now in the collections of the National Library of Scotland and in them Jessie gives tantalising snippets of her brother Tom's lifestyle. On 5 July 1802, for example:

....in the evening went with Tom and Miss Cockburn to hear the great Billington. She really is a most wonderful singer. I was quite delighted with her, the opera was new to me though a very old one Love in a Village....the box prices are raised two shillings while she remains here.²

² National Library of Scotland, MS/8833.

A few days later Jessy received a card from musical impresario Signor Corrie:
to invite Tom to dine with him today to meet Mrs Billington which he accepted and with the greatest pleasure, not like him in general for he is so nice about going anywhere but this is something indeed.³

At this period there are frequent bland references to Tom's dining with relatives or at home followed by whist playing, but Jessy could be quite scathing of her brother. On 22 July 1802 she noted:

he is very unlucky in weather for if there is any rain at all he is sure to get wet; he got two drenchings today and was obliged to come home in borrowed cloathes.⁴

and on 13 August she wrote that 'Tom is at Wilstontown just now and according to his usual luck is getting wet weather'; however although he had 'very bad sport in the shooting way', he had 'plenty of fun he says'.⁵

However she revealed his more sensitive side when describing her marriage ceremony on 1 January 1803, for she said her composure was a little disturbed by 'the heavy sobs of poor Tom and Nell'.⁶ Jessy had met her Irish husband John Harden, a talented amateur artist, on a voyage to visit relatives and friends in Dublin and on 17 May 1803 she hoped she would soon see her mother-in law again because 'Tom is going to Cumberland and has offered to go from thence for her'.⁷ It is at this point that Thomas Allan's keen interest in mineralogy becomes evident. He seems to have made mineral purchases when a schoolboy and after the peace treaty with France in 1801 he visited that country, met several eminent mineralogists and collected specimens from the Dauphine region. In 1803 he and a friend named Swedenstern undertook a tour to the Lake District and on 5 June Jessy reported that Tom had written from Keswick:

He has been very busy Mineralising.... which is his favourite occupation since he went away and becomes daily more so, his Cabinet now is very extensive (I believe) and reckoned the best private one in Edinburgh. Swedenstern is quite an Enthusiast too in that Science which makes him a nice Companion for Tom.⁸

By the time of Thomas Allan's death in 1833, his cabinet had become unequalled in Scotland and 'surpassed by very few in the empire' according to the announcement of the sale of the minerals in 1834.⁹ By then the collection, situated in the large drawing room of Lauriston Castle, consisted of 6,800 specimens contained in 154 drawers encased in three handsome cabinets all of which later sold for £1600. On his way home from Ireland in 1803 with his Aunt and Mrs Harden senior, Tom returned by Dumfries in order to look at land there which his father had bought for upwards of £20,000. According to the Land Tax Rolls for Dumfriesshire, Robert had

³ Ibid, 13 July 1802.

⁴ NLS, MS/8834, 22 July 1802.

⁵ Ibid, 13 August 1802.

⁶ Ibid, MS/8835, 2 January 1803.

⁷ Ibid, 17 May 1803.

⁸ Ibid, 5 June 1803.

⁹ *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 8 November 1834.

acquired Mains of Netherwood and Acrehead and thereafter he called himself Robert Allan of Netherwood, banker.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Britain fought a series of wars with France. On the home front, the Scottish Militia Act of 1797 empowered the Lord Lieutenants of Scotland to raise and command militia regiments for home defence. Thomas Allan enlisted in 1797 and in July 1803 following the renewal of hostilities, he rejoined the Cavalry along with his brother-in-law John Harden. Jessy recounted that they had gone to Musselburgh for a week's drill but hoped that that would be all unless there should be 'an actual invasion'. On 17 July she attended the Review at Dalkeith:

the day being very hot they broke up after it; but indeed you never saw such a figure as Tom is with the sun his Face being so swelled and the skin of it all peeling off; I doubt he would have been worse had he spent the week in India instead of Musselburgh.¹⁰

Tom continued to do his periodic duty in the Militia and in April 1809 became an Ensign in the Second Western Battalion. In spite of fears of an invasion by Napoleon, however, he seems to have had trips to London for business and pleasure and also to Ireland, for, in addition to the *Caledonian Mercury*, Robert Allan also had a partnership in the *Belfast Newsletter* and on this occasion Thomas was instrumental in re-organising the editorial management of both papers.

On 11 March 1804 Jessy wrote rather testily that Tom had borrowed her husband's gig and gone to Greenock 'to stand best man to John Watson who is very foolishly married to a girl with nothing and all he has is for being upper clerk to old Neil Campbell'. As for Tom – his heart 'seems quite impregnable'.¹¹ In April he returned to London where he met a great many of his friends and acquaintances including Chevalier d'Edelcrantz, a Swedish scientist who had been a frequent visitor to Queen Street and, being a 'Connoisseur in Mineralogy, was a great favourite of Tom's'.¹² Jessy returned to the subject of her brother's lack of romance in her first journal from Brathay Hall in Windermere where she and John were eventually to settle.



John Harden, *Brathay Hall*, courtesy of Wikigallery.org.

¹⁰ Ibid., MS/8837, 17 July 1803.

¹¹ Ibid., MS/8840, 11 March.

¹² Ibid., MS/8839, 2 February 1804

In mentioning the forthcoming marriage of a Miss Fairfax whom she 'had fancied for Tom', for she thought 'she would have suited our good Brother admirably', she continued that 'there are probably as good to be found in plenty and I sincerely hope he will be lucky enough to get one of that sort'.¹³ Hoping that her father and sister would soon visit them she added that 'Tom can manage all the business perfectly well when my Father is absent'.¹⁴ When this journal was sent to Edinburgh for despatch to India Robert Allan added on 17 July – 'Tom's birthday he is a fine fellow I think more of him as I get to know him better'. A few days later Tom departed for Staffa with 'a Mr Davie and a Mr Philips from London, the first a prodigy not 21 and the other a famous Philosopher Naturalist'.¹⁵ True to form Tom and his companions experienced rain every day.

Tom did not visit his sister at Brathay nearly as often as she would have liked but his much delayed arrival in September 1805 proved to be momentous. In March Jessy had met the Smith sisters, daughters of Colonel and Mrs Smith of Burnhall Co. Durham who had by unfortunate speculation lost a substantial fortune and had consequently taken up residence at Coniston. Jessy thought the sisters 'fine girls' but was particularly taken with Christian or Kitty. On Tom's arrival she found it 'uphill work' to get him to dine with her neighbours. However, in between rummaging around for stones at Keswick he did ride over to Coniston and met the Smiths. Thereafter there are a number of references in Jessy's journal to Tom's visits to the Smiths – 'he is much taken with that family'.¹⁶ On 13 October she confessed that:

Tom seems to have lost his heart to Christian Smith the second daughter which if it should succeed will make him a charming wife I think being a very sweet and elegant girl - though not very pretty she is extremely interesting.

Succeed it did. Jessy thought Christian 'almost as much in love as he is'; and on 3 November Tom received a letter from Mrs Smith informing him that as her inquiries about him had proved satisfactory she and Mr Smith gave their consent to the proposed marriage.

The newly engaged couple were parted for some weeks as Christian had a previous commitment to stay with a family near London; and Tom returned to Edinburgh – in good spirits according to his father – and embarked on house-hunting. Catherine Allan thought he had set his heart on a house in Charlotte Square which would be completed in two months and she was greatly excited by the prospect of accompanying her brother to London to fetch Christian whom she thought to be 'one of the most amiable sweet women I ever met'.¹⁷ When Jessy and her family returned to Edinburgh in December she discovered that Tom had taken a ready furnished house in Princes Street as an interim measure pending the completion of 19 Charlotte Square which she found very large, adding – 'it may

¹³ Ibid., MS/8842, 24 May 1804.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 17, 24 July 1804.

¹⁶ NLS, MS/8847, 10 October 1805.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16 November 1805.

serve him if he had a dozen children grown up. Raeburn's picture of my Father is to ornament Tom's house'.¹⁸



Thomas Shepherd, *Charlotte Square*

The marriage of Thomas Allan Esq of Edinburgh and Miss C Smith second daughter of George Smith Esq of Coniston took place on 1 January 1806 in Sunbury Church Middlesex. When the couple returned to Edinburgh they had to undertake a round of social visits and engagements with relatives and friends and Jessy accompanied her new sister-in-law 'almost wherever she goes being her oldest acquaintance and Tom can't always be with her'.¹⁹ 'Mrs Tom seldom speaks at all', Jessy noted in her journal, continuing:

She is wonderfully reserved and that always appears worst in a person's own house, being the place of all others where people are expected to exert themselves but she does not seem to have forgot that she is no longer a Miss as you know English ones never speak much in company.²⁰

Tom and Christian's son Robert was born on 12 October 1806. At the end of March in the following year, Jessy, now back at Brathay, expected a visit from the new family. The parents were to go to London and would leave Robert with his grandparents at Coniston but they did not accomplish this until mid May. At this point she sent her sister a description of Tom's wife:

tall and thin, a long mole on her right cheek, small black eyes and a genteel deportment, has not a corner for anyone save her husband so do not be disappointed when you return to find you do not possess a great share of affection, fortunately her husband is the first of mankind and I may confidently say they are a most happy couple.²¹

By the time Jessy visited Edinburgh in July 1809 Thomas had three children, Robert Harriet and Margaret of whom he seemed extremely fond and over indulgent and a 'most comfortable and elegant house exceedingly well furnished but nothing very showy'.²² He and his wife attended the nearby Episcopal Charlotte Chapel in Rose Street.

¹⁸ Ibid, MS/8848, 21 December 1805.

¹⁹ Ibid., MS8849, 5 March 1806.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., MS//8852, 15 April 1806.

²² Ibid., MS/8858, 19 July 1809.

While in Edinburgh the Harden family stayed in Robert Allan's house in Queen Street with much dining there and in Tom's house. In January 1810 Jessy wrote that she had never seen Tom in half as good spirits as he was then:

He is generally very grave and indeed when we are without Company he often falls asleep after dinner. His wife is very quiet indeed but is too well bred to be out of conversation at least to the Persons she sits by. I never saw any young woman so thin as she is, if she continues breeding as fast as she has begun, I don't think her constitution will stand it long.

Prophetic words! Christian and Thomas Allan had two more daughters. Christian, born on 5 December 1810 and dying from chickenpox two years later; and Helen who died at Lauriston Castle on 24 October 1829 in her sixteenth year. On 11 October 1816 Thomas and Christian Allan left London and on 14 May 1817 Christian died at Turin 'where she had gone for the recovery of her health'.²³ In the Waldensian church in the village of La Torre a plaque on the plain wall announced in Latin:

Here lie the remains of Christina, the beloved wife of Thomas Allan, Esquire of Edinburgh, and the affectionate daughter of George Smith, Esquire of Monk-Coniston, in the County of Lancaster in England. She died at Turin, on the 14th day of May 1817.²⁴

Before this sad event, however, more can be gleaned about the Allan's lifestyle from Jessy's journal of 1810. On 21 February she and John attended a 'Rout' of Tom's where she encountered some of her brother's circle.

(this was) the first time I have been in his large Drawing Room. We met a very elegant Company there but as there was nothing doing but chat it was dull enough, we had some of the learned set, Mrs Hamilton, Mrs Fletcher and Co. I don't think such people are a bit more entertaining than their Neighbours and Cards or music are quite necessary to make an Evening go off pleasantly.²⁵

John Harden makes the last journal entries about Tom and his family during a sojourn in Edinburgh in the latter part of 1810. In 1805 both Robert and Thomas Allan made offers to John Harden of a share in the Caledonian Mercury which at that time he appears to have refused having, as his wife expressed it:

so anxious a temper I think him very unfit to undertake anything so liable to trouble as the Mercury although of course he would not be the person answerable in any emergency of that kind.²⁶

At the beginning of 1810, however, Robert Allan announced to the public through various newspaper advertisements that he had relinquished the property of the *Caledonian Mercury* in favour of his son and his son-in-law John Harden with Mr David Buchanan being assumed as a partner and editor. John who observed that Tom now gave much more attention to printing than before, also commented on the Allan children who 'have a neatness and gentility that ours want'.

²³ *Perthshire Courier*, 5 June 1817.

²⁴ William Stephen Gilly, *Narrative of an excursion to the mountains of Piedmont in the year 1823*, second edition (London, 1825), p. 111.

²⁵ NLS, MS/8860, 25 February 1810.

²⁶ NLS, MS/8845, 2 February 1805.

...everything is well and neatly arranged at Charlotte Square – a sufficient degree of elegance and no deficiency of ease or comfort. Mrs Allan's manner is certainly very ladylike and agreeable....some think her reserved or cold but you know I have always found her warm and a favourite. Tom is all frankness.²⁷

Following the birth of Christian he wrote that her mother 'manages these things very quietly and makes little publication or display as anyone I ever saw'.²⁸

An indication of Tom's increased attention to printing is a letter he wrote on 20 October 1810 to Robert Dundas then Chief Secretary for Ireland on the subject of the Irish press. As 'half proprietor of a newspaper printed in Belfast' he enclosed a copy of a letter from his partner explaining the difficulties a recent Parliamentary Act had placed on Irish newspapers by altering the duties to be paid on press advertisements thus disadvantaging them in comparison with English papers.²⁹ A motion in the House of Commons in May 1811 to abolish the relevant Irish clauses was, however, defeated.³⁰

Although John Harden seems to have withdrawn from the printing company run under his name from 1810-12, Jessy's opinion that newspapers were liable to trouble proved true in her brother's case. A Libel suit came before the Jury Court sitting in Glasgow on 5 October 1818 in which Thomas Stewart of Glasgowfield sued for damages of £3000 against Thomas Allan Banker in Edinburgh and Alexander McKay of Belfast. The issue at stake was whether an article published in the *Belfast Newsletter* on 28 January 1817 under the heading 'Heinous Fraud' was injurious to the credit or reputation of Mr Stewart. In defence Mr Allan stated that at the time of publication he had been abroad for the benefit of the health of his wife and he knew nothing of it. Notwithstanding, the Jury awarded £1500 in damages to Stewart.³¹

Though unconnected with press problems, in 1822 Thomas Allan successfully won his action against Dr Thomas Thomson Professor of Chemistry at Glasgow University for defamation of character. Thomson had erroneously and publically expressed views about an apparent forthcoming prosecution of Allan for appropriation of certain minerals. With damages set at £5000 Allan settled for an apology in open Court whereby Dr Thomson admitted that on false information he had accused Thomas Allan banker in Edinburgh most unjustly and had propagated a calumny. In fact Mr Allan had been the direct means of tracing and transmitting to the proper owner in London the minerals in question. The *Scotsman* commented:

We need not add this cause has terminated as everyone who has the honour of knowing Mr Allan knew it would. To his friends no vindication of his honour was necessary.³²

²⁷ NLS, MS/8861, 10 December 1810.

²⁸ Ibid., 16 December 1810.

²⁹ National Records of Scotland, GD51/1/351/2, *Letter of Mr Thos Allan to Rt Honble Robert Dundas*, 3 October 1810.

³⁰ See Hansard online <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1811/may/24/irish-newspapers-duties-on-advertisements> (4 April 2017).

³¹ *Scotsman*, 10 October 1818, *Morning Post*, 12 October 1818.

³² *Scotsman*, 26 January 1822.



John Watson Gordon, *Thomas Allan*, c. 1823

A matter of honour occurred again in 1829 and demonstrated rather sensationally the perils of newspaper ownership. In the early part of the nineteenth century phrenology, a pseudomedicine which involved observing and feeling the human skull to determine a person's psychological attributes became very popular and controversial. In Britain activity centred in Edinburgh with the establishment of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society in 1820; the principal exponent being George Combe, Writer to the Signet. Opinion was divided with Thomas Carlyle concluding a man's soul to be better reflected by his abdomen. The *Scotsman* supported George Combe; the *Caledonian Mercury* did not and in the latter part of 1829, published material at which *Scotsman* editor William Ritchie took offence. On 9 November he challenged Thomas Allan to a duel. George Combe tried to calm affairs but, alerted to the trouble, the authorities served an injunction on both parties. Honour, however, had to be satisfied and following a meeting of relevant friends in a coffee house in Hanover Street at 7.00 pm on 11 November, Mr Charles Maclaren, co-editor of the *Scotsman* agreed to face Dr Browne editor of the *Mercury*. On the following morning at 7.00 am the two parties, accompanied by seconds and surgeons, met at a fixed point on the Ravelston road near Bell's Mills. In an adjacent field 12 paces were measured and a brace of loaded pistols produced for each man. On the word 'fire' the two men did so. Both missed. After consultation all declared the affair ended. The *Scotsman* published full details while the *Caledonian Mercury* carried the following statement:

Mr Allan has observed with regret the various documents which have been inserted in the *Scotsman* newspaper of yesterday, as he deems the step uncalled for and precipitate; but as he has ever declined to trouble the readers of this paper with his own private affairs, it is not his intention to encumber the columns of the *Mercury* with a subject which must now be settled. In a Court of Law alone it can be stripped of the inaccuracies and mis-statements with which it has been over-whelmed.³³

In the event a compromise was reached without resort to the law courts.

Thomas Allan had already encountered the tragic outcome of a duel in 1822, again concerning articles in rival newspapers, this time the *Scotsman* and the *Beacon*. Although not directly involved, Allan acted as a witness in the trial for murder of James Stuart Esq of Dunearn who, having never seriously fired a pistol

³³ *Caledonian Mercury*, 12 November 1829.

previously, had fatally wounded Sir Alexander Boswell, son of James Boswell in a duel on 26 March 1822. Advised by friends, Stuart fled to France before returning for his trial on 10 June. In response to questioning Thomas Allan stated that he had seen Mr Stuart in Calais and relayed to him the news of Boswell's death. Mr Stuart had immediately burst into tears and remained agitated for some time. Mr Allan tried to calm him by representing to him that the unfortunate business had been forced upon him.

'True', he answered, 'but remember, oh remember his poor wife and his family. They remained together for two or three weeks, during which his mind seemed constantly to revert to the unfortunate subject whenever conversation flagged or when Mr Stuart was left alone.'³⁴

After an 18 hour trial the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

These episodes contrast with Thomas Allan's academic pursuits although these sometimes had their dramatic moments such as the Royal Society's investigation in 1829 of Dr Knox's involvement in the Burke and Hare body-snatching and murder outrages. Given his passion for mineralogy it is not surprising that Tom should have been elected to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1805 and the Royal Society in London in 1815. The Royal Society of Edinburgh, founded in 1783, originally met in the old College Library but in 1810 Thomas Allan helped negotiate the purchase of 40-42 George Street from Alexander Brown perfumer and hairdresser.



His banker's caution shows in his letter from Kendal to James Bonnar the Society's treasurer on 22 May. With regard to the price he:

never had the slightest conception of the Royal Society being bound to pay more than 2000 guineas for the George Street house. Mr Dick is totally mistaken in asserting that in conversing with me 2000 guineas was mentioned, had it been so I would have instantly corrected his error....I am sure from what passed between you and me £2,100 was the utmost we thought could be given....and although I agree with you that even at the additional £100 the house is a very great bargain yet I will be very much disappointed to pay so much more than I expected.'³⁵

³⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 June 1822, *Scotsman*, 15 June 1822.

³⁵ NLS, Acc1000/56, *Sale of George Street*.

The Society, however, did pay 2000 guineas but generated income by renting the ground floor shop and in 1813 leasing two south rooms to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for an annual rent of £42. Thomas Allan and Sir George Mackenzie negotiated the terms and in 1813 Allan became a member of the Antiquaries. By this time he officiated as curator of the Royal Society's collections until 1820 and also assisted with finance before becoming treasurer in 1821. In August 1822 George IV made his celebrated visit to Edinburgh orchestrated by Sir Walter Scott who, among other roles, acted as president of the Royal Society. He agreed that an address from the Society should be presented to the Monarch on his arrival by a deputation including himself and Thomas Allan. At the King's first levee at the Palace of Holyroodhouse on 17 August, Allan, along with hundreds of others was personally presented to the King.

Also in 1822 the Society received a proposal from the recently founded Institution for the Promotion of the Fine Arts for the erection of a new building to provide gallery space for the Institution and for the use of a number of learned bodies. During the extensive negotiations, Thomas Allan and Dr Brewster the secretary represented the Royal Society and Allan suggested that the Institution Trustees as the richest body should be at the whole expense of the building and that the other societies should become their tenants 'at a proportionate rent according to their accommodation and a rental of 5% on the outlay'.³⁶ In the end the Board of Manufactures who administered the government grant, paid for the building at the foot of the Mound and occupied space in it along with the Royal Society, the Society of Antiquaries and the Institution for the Promotion of the Fine Arts.



During the construction work which overran the schedule, the building not opening until October 1826, Thomas Allan convened a committee to undertake the furnishing of the future apartments. In November of the following year he indicated that some

³⁶ Ibid., Acc 1000/57, 2 August 1822.

means of warming and ventilating the Society's rooms by heated air 'would be conducive to the members and to the preservation of the property of the Society'.³⁷

Shortly after this the horrors of the West Port murders by William Burke and William Hare scandalised Edinburgh. Dr Knox the anatomist and lecturer who dissected the murdered bodies had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1822 and had presented several papers. Following the cancellation of his lecture on dissection that he should have given to the Society, at his instigation a committee was appointed to inquire into his role in the obtaining of bodies for dissection. Sir Walter Scott refused to serve in what he considered a 'whitewash' exercise and many thought the Committee consisted of Knox's friends. Knox thought otherwise and singled out committee member Thomas Allan for particular vitriol because of his ownership of the *Caledonian Mercury* and his employment of 'a miscreant' as editor. In a letter to the Society's secretary Knox wrote:

I would not believe an angel from Heaven were he to endeavour to persuade me that Mr Allan is a man of honour or even ordinary moral principles. Reflect on his conduct with a reference in the Mercury; how he allowed, nay dictated the most atrocious and infamous libels daily almost for months (and that for the sake of a little paltry gain) against not a stranger.....but a person well known to him; admitted to his house on intimate and friendly terms....the whole property of my family has been insured at his office for the last thirty years!³⁸

Of course numbers of broadsides unconnected with the Mercury had been circulating such as the song purported to have been rendered by medical men at a dinner and sung in the character of Burke:

Gin a body meet a body
All alive and well
Gin a body choke a body
Will a body tell?
Other lads may lift a body
Ne'er a bit will I;
But Dr – will pay me well
And what the waur am I?

Gin a body bring a body
To the Doctor's room;
Gin it be a warm body
Need the Doctor gloom?
Others steal or buy a body
Better tricks have I;
And Dr – aye pays me well;
Then what the waur am I?³⁹

Notwithstanding that Knox attributed to Thomas Allan, responsibility for what he saw as medical professional conspiracies against him as well as the hostility of the public, the Committee's report published in the *Caledonian Mercury*, *Scotsman* and *Courant* newspapers exonerated Knox completely from suspecting that the corpses brought to him had been murdered.

³⁷ Ibid., Acc1000/6, *Minute of the Annual General Meeting*, 26 November 1827.

³⁸ Ibid., Acc1000/352.

³⁹ Ibid.

Concerning his academic work Thomas Allan read several papers over the years to the Royal Society ranging from 'On the Rocks in the Vicinity of Edinburgh' to 'On a Mass of Native Iron from the Desert of Atacama in Peru' and 'An Account of the Geology of the Environs of Nice'. He published an *Alphabetical list of the names of minerals* in 1808 and subsequently the mineral Allanite was named after him. In 1813 he spoke to the Society about the mineralogy of the Faroe Islands. He had been part of Sir George Mackenzie's expedition which had left Leith on 23 May 1812 on board the *Clio* sloop of war bound for the Faroes where they stayed for five weeks. In his account Tom described how he determined the height of the Kodlen, the headland near the village of Eide.



I was determined to ascertain by the simple mechanical means of a line and plummet....and succeeded by letting down a fishing-line, with a stone at the end of it, from the top of this formidable precipice from which, the height appeared, was 1134 feet.(It was not till after the third attempt that I was satisfied with the experiment. In the first two I met with the unlooked for difficulty by the hitching and entanglement of my cord on the projecting points of rock and also by the severity of the blast which striking on so large a surface, blew upwards with tremendous fury....)⁴⁰

When Tom's son Robert, himself a keen mineralogist, visited the Faroes in 1855, he found on the summit of the Kodlin:

a pyramidal stone, placed by the farmer with whom he lived, on the very spot from which he suspended his line over this fearful precipice. His name is also painted, along with that of Sir George Mackenzie, on a slate upon the top of the highest mountain in the island.⁴¹

Robert Chambers, another member of the group, recounted meeting an elderly woman, the daughter of Paul Jonson who had provided accommodation for Thomas Allan and Sir George Mackenzie and had acted as their guide. 'Miss Jonson had some recollection of Mr Allan and appeared gratified in seeing his son after such a long interval'.⁴²

Throughout his adult life Thomas Allan corresponded with numerous eminent scientists such as William Wollaston, who discovered palladium and rhodium; and he supported Carl Ludwig Giesecke, polar explorer and mineralogist in his successful application for the new Professorship of Mineralogy in the Royal Dublin Society. Both

⁴⁰ Thomas Allan, 'An Account of the Mineralogy of the Faroe Islands' in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol. VII, issue 7, p. 242n.

⁴¹ Edinburgh City Libraries, YDA1820A41[D4920], W. C. Henry, *Biographical notice of the late Robert Allan Esq.* (Privately printed), p. 21.

⁴² Robert Chambers, *Tracings of Iceland and the Faroe Islands* (London and Edinburgh, 1856), p. 20.

Thomas and his son Robert accompanied Austrian mineralogist Wilhelm Haidinger to Cornwall in 1823; and Thomas financially aided him to translate his *Treatise on Mineralogy* into English and to catalogue Allan's own collection. Archduke John of Austria sent a box of Styrian minerals to enhance that collection. Sir Walter Scott wrote to Allan in 1823 approving the plan for a dinner to be given to another of Allan's friends of longstanding – Sir Humphry Davy, multi-talented inventor of the famous lamp, and the 'prodigy' who had accompanied Tom Allan to Staffa in the rain in 1804.

While mineralogy remained his abiding interest Thomas Allan also found time to be involved in other activities such as being a Director of the Astronomical Institution of Edinburgh founded in 1811. Following the death of the Astronomical Institution's first President Professor John Playfair in 1819, a Committee chaired by Lord Wemyss resolved to create a monument to Playfair. In his capacity as Secretary Allan wrote to Lord Minto on 22 January 1820 hoping that his Lordship 'will have no objections to communicating the resolutions to any of his friends'.⁴³



Playfair Monument on the Calton Hill

Tom joined the Highland Society of Scotland in 1814 and the Caledonian Horticultural Society in 1822. His charitable work included serving as Treasurer of the New Town Dispensary, a charity set up in 1815 at No 17 Thistle Street for the relief of the sick and diseased poor and for maternity provision and inoculation. He acted as a Committee member of the Institution for Deaf and Dumb Children and as a director of the Edinburgh Education Society which aimed to establish schools for poor children. In addition he contributed to a variety of causes such as the relief of the Portugese in 1811 and of the widows and children of the war dead in 1815; and he made contributions to the Royal Infirmary.

Although not politically active Allan supported the Whig party with its reform agenda. Thus with regard to civic duties, for many years he acted as a Commissioner of Police with responsibilities not just for policing the streets but for street cleaning, lighting, street naming and sanitary conditions within buildings. On 2 December 1817 he attended a meeting of the Inhabitants of the City of Edinburgh who elected him to a Committee to consider what measures ought to be adopted to prevent or lessen the serious injury done to the City by 'the manifest devination from

⁴³ NLS, MS/11913/1, *Letter to Lord Minto*, 22 January 1820.

the original plan of the New Town in the Buildings now erecting and proposed to be erected on both sides of the North Bridge'.⁴⁴ During the 1820s the Commissioners appointed to examine and oversee contentious City Improvements, namely the new approaches to Edinburgh from the south and west, included Thomas Allan who proposed that no building should be undertaken on the Meadows as well as Princes Street in November 1826.

In the course of his professional career he became Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, a Director of the Edinburgh and Leith Water Company and Deputy Chairman, a Trustee of the New Town Markets Company and a director of various finance companies. Simultaneously Thomas Allan had responsibility for two newspapers and a printing business, an insurance company interest and a bank, still being listed in the street directories as Allan and Steuart until 1792 but in 1807 as Robert Allan and Son which it remained until its collapse in 1834.

In 1816 Thomas Allan involved himself in a controversy surrounding the management of the Royal Bank of Scotland in which he had shares. Two of the partners of the private bank Ramsay, Bonar and Company were directors and important customers of the Royal Bank. Unauthorised by his fellow members on the Board, Andrew Bonnar had indulged in the common practice of borrowing large amounts of cash from the Royal Bank to invest in Government stock and other job-stocking transactions in the interest of his own private bank. This procedure had been questioned in June 1815 and the sum of £130,000 was ordered to be paid back – which it was – though not until November 1816. In February 1816, however, Ramsay, Bonar and Co appeared to be canvassing the Royal Bank proprietors in order to influence the approaching election of directors. Thomas Allan entered the fray by having printed a letter from him to the proprietors of the Royal Bank, dated 30 April 1816. He advocated as a fellow proprietor that they should:

elect our own Directors and by nominating men totally unconnected with the house of Messrs Ramsays, Bonars and company and from whom we may expect, not only a steady and upright conduct, but a firm and determinate resolution to place the Bank upon a fair and liberal footing and to relieve it from the thralldom it has so languished under.⁴⁵

Allan's main criticism lay in the fact that none of the directors had any financial experience, most being in the legal profession and one being a merchant and they were unaware of the Ramsay Bonar dealings. He asked:

Can anything afford a stronger evidence of the thralldom in which Mr Ramsay so studiously persevered in holding the Bank; or can it be supposed that he had not some substantial reason for so doing?⁴⁶

In spite of the controversy, however, Alexander Bonar did not retire from the Board of the Royal Bank until 1818 while William Ramsay remained until 1822. Allan himself was elected a Director in 1817.

⁴⁴ *Scotsman*, 6 December 1817.

⁴⁵ NLS, L.C.1227, Thomas Allan, *Letter to the proprietors of the Royal Bank of Scotland*, 30 April, 1816.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1823 Thomas Allan undertook the role of property developer when for £26,000 he bought the estate of Lauriston from Francis J. W. Law, descendant of William Law who had purchased Lauriston in 1683. The sale was not without its problems as there remained doubt as to whether Francis Law was the legal heir, his elder brothers and their heirs being debarred as 'Roman Catholics and aliens' who had not complied with the relevant acts and statutes.⁴⁷ The Court summoned Francis Law of Guildford Street, East Clerkenwell in England to appear to prove 'he is the nearest and lawful heir' and to produce the relevant documents which he failed to do. The affair seems to have dragged on for some years despite Allan's ownership being registered in 1825; and at the roup of Lauriston on 3 December 1834 Mr John Tod WS questioned Mr Allan's title and the auction had to be postponed for a few weeks. In order to buy Lauriston Thomas Allan borrowed 'a very large sum' from his bank at an interest rate of 3%.⁴⁸ He employed the architect William Burn to effect improvements and according to Sir Walter Scott, Burn 'would fain have had the old house pulled down which I wonder at in him, though it would have been the practice of most of his brethren'.⁴⁹ Scott visited Lauriston with Tom Allan on 3 December 1827 and thought that he had displayed good taste, 'supporting instead of tearing down or destroying the old châteaux.....the additions are in very good taste and will make a most comfortable house'.⁵⁰

The new additions gave Tom a house with a dining-room, large and small drawing rooms, bedrooms, dressing rooms, a lady's maid's room, bathroom, library, a housekeeper's room, male and female servants bedrooms, servants' hall, kitchen, housemaid's pantry, butler's pantry, laundry, wine cellar, dairy and workshop with stables, coach-house and other outbuildings. Burn constructed a new entrance and staircase and converted the original doorway to a window. The inventory of Lauriston made in 1834 after Thomas Allan's death named four bedrooms as Mr Thomas Allan's Room, Mr Allan's Bedroom (son Robert), Mr Smith's Room (son-in-law), Mrs Ranken's Room (sister). Tom Allan's room was furnished with a grate, fender and irons, a carpet and two chairs, two mahogany dressing tables, a dressing glass, an old sofa bed with cover, a tent bed with striped curtains, two straw palliases, one hair mattress, one feather mattress, a bolster, pillow, two blankets and a printed bedcover, a corner basin stand with basin and ewer, a mahogany chest of drawers, a towel screen and a bedside table. The auctioneer and appraiser estimated the total value of this bedroom furniture as £13 3s 6d. As a comparison, the six month wage bill for the Lauriston gardener amounted to £16 and for the housemaid £6. Agnes Ranken and her family returned from India in 1812 and by 1834 she, now a widow, resided at Glencorse but must have been a regular visitor to have had a bedroom allocated to her. David Smith WS married Harriet Elizabeth Allan, Tom's eldest daughter on 14 September 1830 at Lauriston Castle; and two years later, also at

⁴⁷ NRS, CS44/121/52, *Decree of Adjudication Allan v Law*, 10 February 1826.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, CS96/739/1, *Robert Allan and Son Sequestration Copy Sederunt Book No 1*, 1834.

⁴⁹ Sir Walter Scott, *Journal*, Vol. II (New York, 1891), p. 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Lauriston her sister Margaret married William Charles Henry Esq. of Manchester on 8 November 1832, the ceremony being conducted by Dr Muirhead minister of Cramond.

Although Thomas Allan obviously intended Lauriston Castle to be a family home he also regarded it as a personal speculation and clearly intended developing the estate. Plans produced by T. Carfrae in 1830 show the ground proposed for villas adjacent to Lauriston Sands with the necessary roads.



Courtesy of the National Records of Scotland

Then on 1 July 1833 he bought from William Davidson of Muirhouse a triangle of land which formed part of the farm of Silverknowes:

bounded on the west and northwest by the hedge and ditch which separate the Estate of Muirhouse from the Estate of Lauriston , on the north by the Old Parish road leading from Muirhouse to Cramond and on the south by the new road leading from Muirhouse to Cramond.⁵¹

The total area measured 3 roods and 39 falls Scotch measure – just under an acre.

A few weeks later, Thomas left Edinburgh with some family members to visit his friend, merchant and banker Charles William Bigge of Linden Hall Morpeth where he became ill with apoplexy on Sunday 8 September.

⁵¹ NRS, CS96/739/1.



Linden Hall

He died on the following Thursday and was brought back to Edinburgh to be buried in the churchyard of St Cuthbert's beside his daughters Christian and Helen. Tom had suffered an attack two years previously in London but latterly, according to the *Caledonian Mercury*. 'his spirits had revived, a more healthful hue had diffused over his countenance' and he had 'begun to resume those habits of active attention to business which were natural to him'.⁵²



His son Robert inherited Lauriston and a substantial personal estate including shares in the Edinburgh Life Assurance Company, the North British Loan Company, the Theatre Royal, the Caledonian Theatre, the Assembly Rooms, the Edinburgh Observatory, the Edinburgh Academy, the Experimental Gardens Inverleith, the Waterloo Hotel, the Bank of Scotland and the Monkland Railway as well as a house in Pitt Street. In the following year, however, the failure of the banking firm Kinnears Smith and Company caused a run on the Allan bank which in turn crashed. As part of the sequestration process still continuing in 1842, Lauriston Castle became the property of the Royal Bank of Scotland which sold it to Mr Ramsay of Barnton on 12 February 1835. Mr Robert Allan requested to be allowed to take such furniture as he required for his new residence on paying the valuation and also asked if he could have a family picture and bust.

⁵² *Caledonian Mercury*, 19 September 1833.



Courtesy of Museums and Galleries Edinburgh

The Earl of Wemyss bought a Rembrandt work for £145 and Mr Adie Optician acquired a telescope for £25. Following extensive advertising Dr Traill purchased the mineral collection for £1600 on behalf a friend, Robert Hyde Greg whose son Robert P. Greg sold it to the Natural History Department of the British Museum in 1860. In 2000 the Natural History Museum purchased Thomas Allan's portrait from a private American collector.

Many newspapers carried a notice of Thomas Allan's death and obituaries appeared in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London and the London and Edinburgh philosophical magazine and journal of science among others which concentrated on his achievements as a scientist. Ironically the rival *Scotsman* newspaper managed to encapsulate the essence of Thomas Allan the man:

....a most active, intelligent and public-spirited citizen. He was one of the few wealthy men in Edinburgh who zealously espoused the popular cause; and as a Commissioner of Police, a Commissioner of Improvements, a member of the Merchant Company and in other capacities, the inhabitants of Edinburgh are indebted to him for many able and valuable services....In private life he was mild, amiable and unpretending, constant in his friendships and easy and affable in his intercourse with men of all parties and classes.⁵³

As might be expected the *Mercury* devoted an entire column of rather more wordy eulogy to its late proprietor, highlighting his public work but emphasising that in private life he was a man of 'quiet unobtrusive habits, strongly averse to parade and ostentation of any kind'. To strangers he might appear distant and reserved but to those who really knew him he was 'naturally kind, considerate and friendly....sincerely attached to his family and ever anxious to diffuse happiness around him'. In summary 'in this excellent and lamented individual, his family has lost an affectionate and indulgent parent, society an active and useful member and Edinburgh an eminent and patriotic citizen' – Thomas Allan 'was a gentleman'.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Scotsman*, 18 September 1833.

⁵⁴ *Caledonian Mercury*, 19 September 1833.