

# 1 *Perspectives and antecedents*

Patrick Neill (1776–1851) was a man of many parts. Head of the largest printing firm in Edinburgh, he contrived to delegate the daily running of the business to a devoted manager and eventual partner, leaving himself free to pursue his major interests in horticulture, botany and natural history. He was also an antiquarian, a town councillor, and an active member of the Church of Scotland, serving both as elder and periodically as a lay member of the General Assembly. Leading members of the academic fraternity and the professions were numbered among his friends. He was a founder member of both the Caledonian (later Royal) Horticultural Society and the Wernerian Natural History Society, which in its heyday rivalled in prestige the Royal Society of Edinburgh (of which he was also a Fellow). For the greater part of his adult life he served as Secretary to both the Caledonian and Wernerian Societies, contributing substantially to the intellectual life and wellbeing of his native city.

Although his interests ranged widely, it is his devotion to horticulture, botany, gardening and natural history which are our present concern. At his death he left behind notebooks, unpublished manuscripts, correspondence and papers which he bequeathed to his long standing friend, the Rev. John Fleming, Professor of Natural Science in the Free College, Edinburgh. Fleming died not long after Neill, whose Executors sought to persuade the Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University, John Hutton Balfour, to write a biography of Neill.<sup>1</sup> However the appeal came to naught. The notebooks and papers were never deposited in a public archive. Just over a century ago they were reported to have vanished and all efforts to discover whether they might still exist have since proved fruitless.<sup>2</sup> Consequently a great deal of information about Neill's life, his youth and the dealings he had with so many people in different trades and professions – all grist to a biographer – are lost to us. But fortunately, his publications, valuable correspondence that has survived, as well as contemporary reports and records together reveal the distinguished part he played in the development of Scottish horticulture and gardening.

Patrick Neill was descended from a family of Haddington printers. The founder of the printing firm of Neill & Company – to which he succeeded – was his uncle, also called Patrick. In 1725, at the age of 14, Neill's uncle left home to serve his apprenticeship with the Edinburgh printer James Cockburn. He evidently thrived in his profession, for in 1749

he entered into partnership with two booksellers: Gavin Hamilton and John Balfour. The former was the son of Dr William Hamilton, the Principal of Edinburgh University. The publisher Archibald Constable considered the firm to be the most respectable retail business in Edinburgh. The three partners quickly established a reputation for producing high quality work. Many notable volumes were printed, including David Hume's *Essay on History*, editions of Virgil and Horace, Terence's *Comedies* and the works of English poets, including Pope. The firm was appointed printers to the University.<sup>3 4</sup>

The partnership lasted for 16 years. When Hamilton and Balfour retired, Patrick introduced as partner his brother Adam, the father of our Patrick Neill. The printing firm was at first located on the premises of Edinburgh University – or College as it was then known – but in 1769 it was transferred to Old Fishmarket Close, a precinct off the High Street formerly favoured by wealthy citizens. This was a strategic location, close to the firm's major customers, the College and the Law Courts. About 1778 Patrick retired to the country and Adam Neill took on Robert Fleming, a bookseller, as partner. But this arrangement did not last long and shortly thereafter Patrick's son James entered the business as partner. In 1802 Adam's son Patrick – the subject our story – was brought in as a third partner at the age of twenty-six. In 1808 James Neill bought a farm at Foxhall in what proved to be a financial disaster that mired him in debt. In 1812 Adam Neill died, leaving the two cousins James and Patrick in charge of the firm. But they soon quarrelled and the firm was split into two.<sup>5</sup> The pros and cons of the dispute between the cousins is obscure. In a letter to his lawyer, James complained that although he had worked harmoniously for many years with his uncle Adam, as soon as he died, Patrick adopted a 'wrangling disposition', bringing in an accountant to go through the books and seeking the advice of his own 'man of business'.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that this was prompted by concern that James was taking too much out of the profits to pay for his debts. James also complained that Patrick, although young and able, never spent more than an hour or two on his daily visits to the premises; an observation which rings true as early evidence of the competing attractions of his other interests, which increasingly claimed most of his attention. The upshot of the dispute was that James abandoned his Edinburgh concerns and later emigrated, leaving Patrick in sole charge of Neill & Company.

Neill was evidently both a competent printer and businessman, for the firm prospered under his control. Although it provided a comfortable income, he was loath to devote the time required for the day-to-day running of the business, since he was so fully committed to both the Caledonian Horticultural and the Wernerian Natural History Societies, as well as his botanising and his garden. This problem was solved when Neill employed an assistant, William Fraser. Fraser became manager, handling all the day-to-day business, and eventually Neill's partner, although the original name of the firm was retained. He was responsible for modernising the plant with steam driven presses and was in all respects, reliable and competent. There is little doubt that he felt a debt of gratitude to Neill for devolving so much authority to him, for he called one of his sons Patrick Neill Fraser. The firm continued to print scientific works, Government and legal publications, editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and other prestigious works. Fraser died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1846 and Neill found himself shouldering the responsibility of running the firm at a time when

he was on the point of formal and effective retirement. However, he hastened to bring in Fraser's sons, Alexander and Patrick Neill Fraser, who took over the business when Neill died in 1851 and ran it with great success.<sup>7</sup>

Little can be said of Neill's early life. Apparently he was brought up as an Anti-Burgher, an extreme Protestant sect. However, he later adhered to the established Church of Scotland and stayed with it at the Disruption of 1843.<sup>8</sup> He became an elder of St Mary's Kirk and was, on several occasions, a lay member of the General Assembly, representing the Northern Isles of Orkney, where he had relatives. He was no bigot and remained a close friend of some of the dissenters. Since his name does not appear among the pupils attending either the High School or Heriots Hospital, it is not known where he received his early education. It was his original intention to train as a surgeon at the University of Edinburgh. The matriculation records of the University show that Patricius Neill was in Andrew Dalzell's Latin class in 1789 and 1790. He must have been an attentive pupil, since in later life he was never at loss for an apt quotation from the classics. The extent of his medical studies is unknown but if he attended medical classes he would have been taught botany, which was an essential constituent of a medical training, and this may have laid the foundations for his life-long interest in plants. He soon became a competent field botanist, familiar with the wild flora of Scotland. When he inherited Canonmills Cottage and garden he established a reputation as collector of newly introduced species of plants from many different parts of the world.

He never graduated, for it seems his university career was cut short by his joining the firm, no doubt meeting the wishes of his father who needed assistance in coping with the increasing demands of the expanding business, and perhaps also because cousin James was not pulling his weight. Given Neill's devotion to science and learning, the termination of his studies must have been an acute disappointment. Indeed, he was something of an academic *manqué*. Many of his closest friends were university professors and lecturers. Since his firm printed so many academic works the premises became a congenial meeting place for the authors and their friends.<sup>9</sup> No doubt Neill revelled in such intellectual company. When a town councillor, he played his part in the partisan campaigns that attended the filling of University Chairs. His subsequent Fellowships of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Linnaean Society, and his award of a Doctorate of Laws in 1834 from the University of Aberdeen no doubt compensated for not having a university degree.

We might wonder about his appearance and his character. We learn from several obituaries that he was of moderate stature and of a lean build. His portrait by Patrick Syme shows him as clean shaven, with a prominent nose and chin and an expression which some found rather sardonic. He wore a brown wig, latterly at least. He always dressed in dark clothes with a long black coat and wore a wide white cravat. In his later years he walked with a slight limp. He became a familiar Edinburgh figure, walking up Pitt Street from his home in Canonmills to his premises off the High Street, with a gold-topped cane and a large umbrella.<sup>10 11</sup>

His good nature and courteous, helpful manner were widely acknowledged. That he served so long as Secretary to both the Caledonian Horticultural and the Wernerian Societies is sufficient proof of his tact and discretion. The Caledonian Horticultural Society

expressed its appreciation at intervals by voting him a piece of plate, commissioning his portrait in oils and arranging for a bust by the finest sculptor in Scotland. Near the end of his career he was presented with an elaborate piece of silver plate paid for by subscriptions from 600 Scottish gardeners. His contemporaries held him in the highest regard, none more so than the gardeners of the Scottish lowland estates. The benign exterior however, concealed a streak of uncompromising pugnacity that was revealed whenever he was challenged on some question of principle or his interests were threatened.

Neill was a bachelor whose household was run by Ann Neill, the daughter of his cousin James. The only hint of a possible romantic attachment appeared in his will, in which he bequeathed ten pounds to Marianne Kerr, High Street, Burnt Island, as a 'remembrancer'.

No doubt, once he had taken possession of the family home at Canonmills Cottage, like many bachelors, the routine of his life changed little from day to day. He was very hospitable, frequently inviting friends, fellow botanists and academics, ministers of the Kirk or the Lord Provost for dinner. If any distinguished naturalist visited Edinburgh it would not be long before he found himself dining with Neill, probably in the company of several professional men of similar interests, invited to meet him. Politically, Neill was constitutionally conservative and, as a Tory in a predominantly Whig Town Council, he represented the so-called aristocratic ward of the New Town for many years.

We get a glimpse of life at Canonmills Cottage from the reminiscences of George Bentham, the botanist, who visited Edinburgh in 1823 and again in 1827.<sup>12</sup> On both occasions Bentham noted the wealth of Neill's garden in rare or unusual plants, tastefully distributed in beds and borders. He marvelled at the unexpected collection of birds which included a heron, a cormorant, a wild goose, a solan goose or gannet, a great black backed gull, as well as other species of gull, ducks, cats and dogs, all living harmoniously together and ever ready to be fed. Apart from the birds, there was even an ichneumon and a siren from the swamps of Carolina. At his first visit, his fellow guests at dinner included several of Neill's close friends: Robert Bald, a mining engineer from Alloa; Robert Stevenson, the lighthouse engineer – an almost exact contemporary of Neill and grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson – and George Arnott, later Professor of Botany at the University of Glasgow. Four years later saw Bentham again Neill's guest at dinner, accompanied this time by the same George Arnott and also his brother. Bentham reflected how, sitting in the same room with much the same company, he experienced a sense of timelessness as if this dinner was but a continuation of the last one he had enjoyed at Canonmills Cottage. He also remarked rather enigmatically, that he found Neill a rather curious kind of man, but sadly did not elaborate further. Bentham commented on the unusual countenance of the household 'factotum'; Peggy Oliver who had a winning way with the little menagerie of animals that followed her about hoping for food. There were also one or two other domestics and, of course, the gardener or rather succession of gardeners who, after a spell with Neill, generally moved on to responsible jobs elsewhere. Thus, we can envisage the little ménage at Canonmills Cottage pursuing a very tranquil and pleasant existence over the years.

Neill was well off since his printing firm was flourishing. Having devolved most of the worries of business to his manager, he was free to pursue his scholarly interests and supervise





*Canonmills Loch, Old and New Edinburgh, James Grant, 1880, Cassell*

his plant collection. In his last years he was handicapped by failing eyesight and suffered a severe stroke shortly before he died. But he kept up his correspondence and cherished his plants to the very end.

Neill lived through momentous times which shaped the course of history. He was born in the same year that Adam Smith published '*An enquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*'. At the age of 13 he would have heard of the fall of the Bastille in Paris and four years later no doubt shared the horror of the British establishment at news of the execution of Louis XVI and his queen. Then there was the interminable war with France and the threat of a Napoleonic invasion. It was not until he was almost 40 that the Battle of Waterloo ushered in an era of comparative peace. His reaction to these events would probably have appeared in the missing papers. We do know that in 1817 he and two gardener colleagues visited the battlefield of Waterloo and remembered their fellow countrymen who had fallen in the battle. How far the sequence of events in France contributed to his conservative politics is unknown but quite likely. He had reservations about the advantages of the Act of Union of 1707 and had a nostalgic regard for the old Scots ways which were fast disappearing.

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- 1 James McNab's Scrapbook. Library, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.
  - 2 Druce, G. C., *The Life and Work of George Don, 1903–1908*, Notes, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, (3), pp.55–91.
  - 3 Neil & Co., *The Printing House of Neill*, 1917, Paul's Wark, 212 Causewayside, Edinburgh.
  - 4 Moray McLaren (ed), 1949, *The House of Neill, 1749–1949*, Neill & Co., Edinburgh.
  - 5 *Ibid.*
  - 6 Gen 29/182. LA/75. National Library of Scotland.
  - 7 *The Printing House of Neill.*
  - 8 J.B. Barclay, 1852, *Patrick Neill, LL.D, FRSE, Oct. 25, 1176–Sept. 3, 1851. The Cottage Gardener*, (VII), p.121.
  - 9 Moray McLaren, *The House of Neill.*
  - 10 J.B. Barclay, *Patrick Neill.*
  - 11 P.P. Brotherstone, 1923, *Patrick Neill, Gardeners Chronicle*, vol. LXIII, 3rd series, pp.320–321.
  - 12 Marion Filipuik, (ed), 1992, *George Bentham, 1810–1834*, University of Toronto Press, p.158, p.165.