Ezra Peden and the Thousand Tales

By Gerard McKeever

Let me tell you a story. It's 1705. Midwinter. Nithsdale. A man is dying.

His name is Dalzell, which in the Scots spoken round here sounds a lot like dee-el, or deil. This Dalzell isn't the devil, exactly, but he knows he's going to hell because of what he did to the Covenanters. The Killing Times were decades ago now, but as the laird of Bonshaw lies delirious on his deathbed, he lives again in agonising detail that day that he murdered all five of the Cameron boys, not forgetting their mother, who died of a broken heart after Dalzell produced the decapitated heads of three of her sons. He shot the remaining two right in front of her. Their father, William Cameron, survived somehow, if survival is the word: homeless and alone and broken. He's here now, at the Dalzell's Bonshaw estate, kneeling outside on the candlelit porch chanting a wild song that is both a prayer and a curse.

The preacher has to step over William to get inside. His name is Ezra Peden: one of the old cast, plucked from the sixteenth century or even earlier with his Bible and his sword. He is a puritanical man of God at war with the devil in the land, delivering Scotland of its witches, its elves, its sinfulness in all forms from pagan ritual to village song and dance. His parish is a frontier. He always wins, and yet the witchcraft lingers on, strangely resilient, as if called into existence by the act of erasure.

The wind shrieks. A storm has been rising all day, as Ezra Peden prepared himself for a contest over the laird of Bonshaw's soul. But when he arrives at the bedside it is already too late. The nobleman is beyond human reach, travelling unmoored in time through all the old stories, the old murders. The things he did at Closeburn, Irongray and the rest demand a final reckoning. The wind now wreaks havoc with the flagstone roofing of the old mansion. Before suddenly, summoning a rush of strength from the past, Dalzell rises from the bed with black eyes and unsheathes his sword and calls out … his heart has stopped long before he hits

the floor.

The preacher grimaces. Somehow or other, he knows that this is not the end.

Time passes. Come the following spring, Ezra Peden finds himself in the forest on his way home from a wedding at Buckletiller. It was a muted affair of course, with him present, but he is still within earshot when a fiddler back at the party strikes up a carefree tune. Sin. He is on the point of turning back to deliver his admonishment when he becomes aware of a stranger on the path: horse and rider, black in the moonlight. Without an exchange of words, they begin to shadow the preacher's every turn through the woods, moving in perfect unison with one another and with him.

What happens next I have on good authority, which is to say Allan Cunningham's 1822 *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*. As it has been passed down over two centuries worth of ever-changing readings, then, the laird of Bonshaw has returned to earth to confront Ezra Peden, mounted on a steed that is another damned Scotsman transfigured. They speak … and at this point the tale begins to fracture into recursive details, slipping through the fingers of the storyteller. Just before the moon rises on Sunday night in a romantic spot beside the ancient burial ground, a shepherd thinks he sees Ezra Peden in conversation with a beautiful widow. The preacher has been tempted and overcome by a demon in another form, perhaps, but the narrative is coming apart at its seams into something primal. A chorus of voices circulate events in the round. Ezra Peden is found nearby in a hysterical condition, babbling unrepeatable things, before Cunningham's 'hasty and imperfect' performance falls abruptly off into an open question about the nature of stories.[1]

***

The British literary world of the 1810s and 1820s was small. True, the reading public was rapidly growing in size as the cost of print came down, and many would-be authors took their chances with a book or two only to realise the difficulty of clearing a profit, never mind making a living. But the core of the literary world was constituted by a set of social cliques, in which varieties of semi-formal patronage (an introduction, a good word, a favourable or 'puffing' review) were prerequisites to sustained success. Across the voluminous correspondence carried on by most participants in these cliques, new and prospective works were

pitched and advertised, rejected and modified, while opinions and gossip circulated freely.[2] This sociable exchange was also carried on in public fora via the medium of the literary periodicals (including *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *London Magazine*, the *New Monthly Magazine,* the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*), which cultural historians have come to identify as the lifeblood of the period's literary culture.[3] At the same time, the scale of the reading diet constituted by fashionable new 'literature' – a concept then emerging into its narrowed modern form (poetry, fiction, drama, criticism) – remained manageable enough to enable a shared cultural lexicon, especially since the output of anyone considered worth knowing was digested in the essential periodicals.[4]

What exactly this meant for the direction taken by literary art in the early nineteenth century is a more complicated issue. On the one hand, a keen awareness of the work of others may have inspired originality, with authors driven to cultivate a distinctive personal offering. Admittedly, given the outsize influence in the marketplace of major figures (especially Walter Scott) who structured the cultural mainstream, there were commercial incentives for this originality to modify rather than transform the zeitgeist. In the case of Scott, for example, writers including James Hogg, John Galt and Susan Ferrier found successful niches in the marketplace (in part) by pivoting aspects of Scott's writing, taking up alternative positions in a constellation with the 'Author of Waverley' at its centre.[5]

On the other hand, this close-knit cultural dynamic allowed new ideas, ranging from individual motifs up to entirely new literary genres, to be iterated with striking efficiency in a kind of cultural echo-chamber. In many cases (theatrical adaptations of Scott's work being a good example), literature was not an isolated field enabling these processes, but rather one element within a multimedia landscape that included printmaking and illustration, music and song, drama and other forms of live performance.[6] Still, with those in positions in power (publishers, journal editors, famous authors) moderating the process, the collective labour of the literati could be channelled in such a way that items quickly progressed from a condition of novelty to that of codified custom. This includes the evolving form of the historical novel; a revival of the Spenserian stanza; revitalised quotations from Shakespeare and other authorities; and the

stylistic touches of celebrated contemporary authors. Feedback from the market (that is, from booksellers, library office holders and individual readers) must also be considered: evidence from library borrowing records in the period suggests that, while individual tastes could be idiosyncratic, readers as a whole were attached to a relatively compact popular canon headlined by Scott, *Blackwood's* and other household names.[7]

One of the most significant things that was being collectively iterated in the literary world during the early decades of the nineteenth century was the form of the prose-fictional tale.[8] Tales were typically made-to-measure as article-length contributions to the literary periodicals (most notably *Blackwood's*), although they were also collected in book form: see, for example, Hogg's widely popular *Winter Evening Tales* (1820). They were notionally the modern continuation of a folkloric storytelling tradition that stretched back through popular print forms including chapbooks and broadsides, as well as inherited manuscript authorities, and into the less qualifiable realm of oral transmission. At the same time, they drew attention to their avant-garde credentials as an experimental art form spearheading innovation in and beyond the periodical press. The paradoxical old/new condition this created was neatly expressed in fictional devices featuring an editor-narrator somewhere on a sliding scale between folk participant and antiquarian observer, apparently remediating a local tradition for the press.[9]

Tales were strongly identified with Scotland and its patchwork of local and regional cultures.[10] Indeed, with Walter Scott as its leading light; with Robert Burns one of its patron saints; with the book trade itself operating out of Edinburgh as a secondary centre; and with London Scots like John Murray conspicuous in the network of metropolitan publishers; the anglophone literary world of the early nineteenth century was disproportionately Scottish in its makeup. Allan Cunningham's first major publication came with his anonymous contributions to R. H. Cromek's *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810). However, he truly found his footing in the above milieu nine years later, when he began contributing to *Blackwood's*, and when the magazine's principal writer John Wilson took to the same pages to heap praise on his work for *Remains*.[11]

Over the ensuing two decades, Cunningham would sustain a motley literary career that saw him become a stalwart of the periodicals and eventually a

respected (and commercially successful) biographer, most notably in his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (6 vols, 1829–33), which was published within *Murray's Family Library*, and his *Works of Robert Burns* (8 vols, 1834) for the London Scot publisher James Cochrane. However, Cunningham's reputation today (such as it is) commonly rests on the twin pillars of his early lyrics for Cromek, and his attachment as a contributor to the *London Magazine* from the end of 1820 through the duration of 1824.[12] In this latter context, Cunningham was part of a metropolitan clique that included Thomas de Quincey, Charles Lamb, John Clare, William Hazlitt and John Keats, who collectively turned the early 1820s *London Magazine* into a creative powerhouse.

Cunningham, in the *London Magazine*, was at work iterating the folkloric regional tales more often associated with *Blackwood's*. With attention to both sides of the Anglo-Scottish borderland, but especially his native Dumfriesshire, he developed a sufficiently weighty body of fiction in the *London*, primarily under the series heading 'Traditional Literature', to proceed to a collected edition. Thus, with new additions and some editorial tweaks, his *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry* was published in two octavo volumes in 1822. Cunningham was certainly in dialogue with peers and precursors including both Scott and Hogg, but at this relatively early moment in the evolution of the tale as a form, this material remained strikingly innovative in its attempts to model 'tradition' for the cosmopolitan venue of the *London Magazine*. By 1842, Edgar Allan Poe would be declaring 'unity of effect or impression' essential to the genre of the tale, a codifying maxim that went on to provide the literary history of the 'short story', supposedly emerging into mature wholeness out of the amorphous world of early nineteenth-century tales via a process of collective iteration.[13]

Recent criticism has pointed to a more varied, and messier, scene of nineteenth-century short fiction that Poe's maxim occludes.[14] Returning to the early gestation period, and in particular to 'Ezra Peden', which Cunningham added to his *London Magazine* material for the 1822 book publication of *Traditional Tales*, suggests a different view of the primal currency of stories in general.

***

To return to the beginning, *Traditional Tales* opens with a preface that discusses storytelling as practised by what Cunningham calls 'oral novelists', guardians of a

folk tradition whose ‘stories were varied, according to the taste or talent of the reciter: every year brought a change in the plot or the succession of incidents’. The idea that ‘many of the stories which are inserted in this collection’ are simply lifted from ‘these humble and wandering novelists’ should certainly be understood rhetorically, although Cunningham’s work does remediate existing storytelling traditions including the Border ballads.[15] At the same time, the process of tale-iteration taking place in and around the nineteenth-century periodicals acts as an unspoken proxy for ‘tradition’ here.

Continuing in a similar vein, the reader of ‘Ezra Peden’, the first tale proper in the volume, finds themselves loaded with propositions such as, ‘It is seldom that tradition requires any illustration: its voice is clear’, although in this case there is ‘something too mystical and hallowed to be sought into by a devout people’ (5–6). In fact, the story arrives hedged around by three competing sources of authenticity and/or explanation: tradition, truth and the imagination. Cunningham gleefully piles these one on top of the other in working towards the possibility of a conclusion:

> Tradition always conducts Ezra and the mariner’s widow to this seldom frequented place: a hundred and a hundred times have I hearkened to the wild and variable accounts of the peasantry […] Truth contents herself with the summary of a few and unsatisfactory particulars: the dawn of morning came, says Truth, and Ezra had not returned to his manse. Something evil hath happened, said Imagination, scattering as she spoke a thousand tales of a thousand hues, many of which still find credence among the pious people of Galloway (26–27).

This sense of competing testimony, indeed competing epistemologies, works to thrilling effect in these tales, in sentences that jostle for position and cancel each other, producing an experimental demonstration of the effervescent magic of storytelling.

In the case of ‘Ezra Peden’, which is introduced as a peculiarly startling instalment of folklore/fakelore, we are told that ‘The most intrepid peasant becomes graver and graver as he proceeds, stops before the natural termination of the story, and hesitates to pry into the supernatural darkness of the tradition’ (6). This terminal irresolution, so wonderfully illustrated by the close of ‘Ezra Peden’ itself, is now seen as a defining achievement of Romantic short fiction, in

which ‘a wilful spirit of experiment’ resists any ‘single form’.[16] Still, Cunningham’s writing, it should be emphasised, has a peculiarly iterative quality, particularly when viewed over the longer term. In ‘Ezra Peden’ alone, detectable influences include Scott’s Reformation novels *The Monastery* and *The Abbot* (both 1820) as well as his handling of the Covenanters in *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816) and Hogg’s rejoinder in *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818). In a more personal sense, the Dalzell mythos – here involving an allusion to Sir Thomas Dalyell of The Binns (1615–1685) – would reoccur in Cunningham’s work as a sign of aristocratic degeneracy in southwest Scotland.[17] Similarly, images in this story such as a whirlwind on the Solway Firth, and indeed the magical transfiguration of people into horses, became a part of Cunningham’s stock-in-trade.[18]

Nevertheless, the moment of the early 1820s, in which tales were circulating widely but retained their shock-of-the-new and a sense of vital indeterminacy, helpfully points us away from Poe’s aesthetics of unity and towards one of *raw power*. The basic currency of a story in these terms is an *unco*, a disruption, a knot, anything sufficiently arresting to stick in the mind. Storytelling, here and perhaps more generally, is a cultural ecology in which the collective labour of writers and readers, or speakers and audiences, refines what does and does not work in a kind of survival-of-the-fittest that soaks in the morality, myths and ideologies of the host culture. It is crucially these earworms, the essential components of narrative DNA, that are subject to the process of transmission that Cunningham’s tales model on oral tradition, and literally enact in the marketplace. This need not be limited to issues of plotting. In fact, what an echo of ‘Ezra Peden’ like mine above excludes is the fact that much of Cunningham’s effect lies in his style, an immediately recognisable, heavy prose that flows in and out of the verse elements he incorporates in many tales. Equally, in formal terms, while unity and cohesion may well provide elements of a good story, *Traditional Tales* in its bicentenary year tells us that jaggedness and incompletion are often equally as addictive.

Thus as ‘Ezra Peden’ begins to drop off into its whirlpool of a conclusion, with details like ‘he saw what ought not to be seen’ and ‘the unholy voices which at midnight sailed round the manse and kirk’ being passed around by Cunningham’s many hands in front of the reader’s eyes – ‘a thousand tales of a thousand hues’ (pp. 26–27) – the story is breaking down into its embryonic elements, the

irresistible hooks which are what finally matters in a tale.Let me tell you a story. It’s 1705. Midwinter. Nithsdale. A man is dying.

His name is Dalzell, which in the Scots spoken round here sounds a lot like dee-el, or deil. This Dalzell isn’t the devil, exactly, but he knows he’s going to hell because of what he did to the Covenanters. The Killing Times were decades ago now, but as the laird of Bonshaw lies delirious on his deathbed, he lives again in agonising detail that day that he murdered all five of the Cameron boys, not forgetting their mother, who died of a broken heart after Dalzell produced the decapitated heads of three of her sons. He shot the remaining two right in front of her. Their father, William Cameron, survived somehow, if survival is the word: homeless and alone and broken. He’s here now, at the Dalzell’s Bonshaw estate, kneeling outside on the candlelit porch chanting a wild song that is both a prayer and a curse.

The preacher has to step over William to get inside. His name is Ezra Peden: one of the old cast, plucked from the sixteenth century or even earlier with his Bible and his sword. He is a puritanical man of God at war with the devil in the land, delivering Scotland of its witches, its elves, its sinfulness in all forms from pagan ritual to village song and dance. His parish is a frontier. He always wins, and yet the witchcraft lingers on, strangely resilient, as if called into existence by the act of erasure.

The wind shrieks. A storm has been rising all day, as Ezra Peden prepared himself for a contest over the laird of Bonshaw’s soul. But when he arrives at the bedside it is already too late. The nobleman is beyond human reach, travelling unmoored in time through all the old stories, the old murders. The things he did at Closeburn, Irongray and the rest demand a final reckoning. The wind now wreaks havoc with the flagstone roofing of the old mansion. Before suddenly, summoning a rush of strength from the past, Dalzell rises from the bed with black eyes and unsheathes his sword and calls out … his heart has stopped long before he hits the floor.

The preacher grimaces. Somehow or other, he knows that this is not the end.

Time passes. Come the following spring, Ezra Peden finds himself in the forest on his way home from a wedding at Buckletiller. It was a muted affair of course, with him present, but he is still within earshot when a fiddler back at the party strikes

up a carefree tune. Sin. He is on the point of turning back to deliver his admonishment when he becomes aware of a stranger on the path: horse and rider, black in the moonlight. Without an exchange of words, they begin to shadow the preacher's every turn through the woods, moving in perfect unison with one another and with him.

What happens next I have on good authority, which is to say Allan Cunningham's 1822 *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry*. As it has been passed down over two centuries worth of ever-changing readings, then, the laird of Bonshaw has returned to earth to confront Ezra Peden, mounted on a steed that is another damned Scotsman transfigured. They speak … and at this point the tale begins to fracture into recursive details, slipping through the fingers of the storyteller. Just before the moon rises on Sunday night in a romantic spot beside the ancient burial ground, a shepherd thinks he sees Ezra Peden in conversation with a beautiful widow. The preacher has been tempted and overcome by a demon in another form, perhaps, but the narrative is coming apart at its seams into something primal. A chorus of voices circulate events in the round. Ezra Peden is found nearby in a hysterical condition, babbling unrepeatable things, before Cunningham's 'hasty and imperfect' performance falls abruptly off into an open question about the nature of stories.[19]

***

The British literary world of the 1810s and 1820s was small. True, the reading public was rapidly growing in size as the cost of print came down, and many would-be authors took their chances with a book or two only to realise the difficulty of clearing a profit, never mind making a living. But the core of the literary world was constituted by a set of social cliques, in which varieties of semi-formal patronage (an introduction, a good word, a favourable or 'puffing' review) were prerequisites to sustained success. Across the voluminous correspondence carried on by most participants in these cliques, new and prospective works were pitched and advertised, rejected and modified, while opinions and gossip circulated freely.[20] This sociable exchange was also carried on in public fora via the medium of the literary periodicals (including *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the *London Magazine*, the *New Monthly Magazine,* the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*), which cultural historians have come to identify as the lifeblood of the period's literary culture.[21] At the same time, the scale of the

reading diet constituted by fashionable new 'literature' – a concept then emerging into its narrowed modern form (poetry, fiction, drama, criticism) – remained manageable enough to enable a shared cultural lexicon, especially since the output of anyone considered worth knowing was digested in the essential periodicals.[22]

What exactly this meant for the direction taken by literary art in the early nineteenth century is a more complicated issue. On the one hand, a keen awareness of the work of others may have inspired originality, with authors driven to cultivate a distinctive personal offering. Admittedly, given the outsize influence in the marketplace of major figures (especially Walter Scott) who structured the cultural mainstream, there were commercial incentives for this originality to modify rather than transform the zeitgeist. In the case of Scott, for example, writers including James Hogg, John Galt and Susan Ferrier found successful niches in the marketplace (in part) by pivoting aspects of Scott's writing, taking up alternative positions in a constellation with the 'Author of Waverley' at its centre.[23]

On the other hand, this close-knit cultural dynamic allowed new ideas, ranging from individual motifs up to entirely new literary genres, to be iterated with striking efficiency in a kind of cultural echo-chamber. In many cases (theatrical adaptations of Scott's work being a good example), literature was not an isolated field enabling these processes, but rather one element within a multimedia landscape that included printmaking and illustration, music and song, drama and other forms of live performance.[24] Still, with those in positions in power (publishers, journal editors, famous authors) moderating the process, the collective labour of the literati could be channelled in such a way that items quickly progressed from a condition of novelty to that of codified custom. This includes the evolving form of the historical novel; a revival of the Spenserian stanza; revitalised quotations from Shakespeare and other authorities; and the stylistic touches of celebrated contemporary authors. Feedback from the market (that is, from booksellers, library office holders and individual readers) must also be considered: evidence from library borrowing records in the period suggests that, while individual tastes could be idiosyncratic, readers as a whole were attached to a relatively compact popular canon headlined by Scott, *Blackwood's* and other household names.[25]

One of the most significant things that was being collectively iterated in the literary world during the early decades of the nineteenth century was the form of the prose-fictional tale.[26] Tales were typically made-to-measure as article-length contributions to the literary periodicals (most notably *Blackwood's*), although they were also collected in book form: see, for example, Hogg's widely popular *Winter Evening Tales* (1820). They were notionally the modern continuation of a folkloric storytelling tradition that stretched back through popular print forms including chapbooks and broadsides, as well as inherited manuscript authorities, and into the less qualifiable realm of oral transmission. At the same time, they drew attention to their avant-garde credentials as an experimental art form spearheading innovation in and beyond the periodical press. The paradoxical old/new condition this created was neatly expressed in fictional devices featuring an editor-narrator somewhere on a sliding scale between folk participant and antiquarian observer, apparently remediating a local tradition for the press.[27]

Tales were strongly identified with Scotland and its patchwork of local and regional cultures.[28] Indeed, with Walter Scott as its leading light; with Robert Burns one of its patron saints; with the book trade itself operating out of Edinburgh as a secondary centre; and with London Scots like John Murray conspicuous in the network of metropolitan publishers; the anglophone literary world of the early nineteenth century was disproportionately Scottish in its makeup. Allan Cunningham's first major publication came with his anonymous contributions to R. H. Cromek's *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810). However, he truly found his footing in the above milieu nine years later, when he began contributing to *Blackwood's*, and when the magazine's principal writer John Wilson took to the same pages to heap praise on his work for *Remains*.[29]

Over the ensuing two decades, Cunningham would sustain a motley literary career that saw him become a stalwart of the periodicals and eventually a respected (and commercially successful) biographer, most notably in his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (6 vols, 1829–33), which was published within *Murray's Family Library*, and his *Works of Robert Burns* (8 vols, 1834) for the London Scot publisher James Cochrane. However, Cunningham's reputation today (such as it is) commonly rests on the twin pillars of his early lyrics for Cromek, and his attachment as a contributor to the *London Magazine* from the end of 1820 through the duration of 1824.[30] In this latter

context, Cunningham was part of a metropolitan clique that included Thomas de Quincey, Charles Lamb, John Clare, William Hazlitt and John Keats, who collectively turned the early 1820s *London Magazine* into a creative powerhouse.

Cunningham, in the *London Magazine*, was at work iterating the folkloric regional tales more often associated with *Blackwood's*. With attention to both sides of the Anglo-Scottish borderland, but especially his native Dumfriesshire, he developed a sufficiently weighty body of fiction in the *London*, primarily under the series heading 'Traditional Literature', to proceed to a collected edition. Thus, with new additions and some editorial tweaks, his *Traditional Tales of the English and Scottish Peasantry* was published in two octavo volumes in 1822. Cunningham was certainly in dialogue with peers and precursors including both Scott and Hogg, but at this relatively early moment in the evolution of the tale as a form, this material remained strikingly innovative in its attempts to model 'tradition' for the cosmopolitan venue of the *London Magazine*. By 1842, Edgar Allan Poe would be declaring 'unity of effect or impression' essential to the genre of the tale, a codifying maxim that went on to provide the literary history of the 'short story', supposedly emerging into mature wholeness out of the amorphous world of early nineteenth-century tales via a process of collective iteration.[31]

Recent criticism has pointed to a more varied, and messier, scene of nineteenth-century short fiction that Poe's maxim occludes.[32] Returning to the early gestation period, and in particular to 'Ezra Peden', which Cunningham added to his *London Magazine* material for the 1822 book publication of *Traditional Tales*, suggests a different view of the primal currency of stories in general.

***

To return to the beginning, *Traditional Tales* opens with a preface that discusses storytelling as practised by what Cunningham calls 'oral novelists', guardians of a folk tradition whose 'stories were varied, according to the taste or talent of the reciter: every year brought a change in the plot or the succession of incidents'. The idea that 'many of the stories which are inserted in this collection' are simply lifted from 'these humble and wandering novelists' should certainly be understood rhetorically, although Cunningham's work does remediate existing storytelling traditions including the Border ballads.[33] At the same time, the process of tale-iteration taking place in and around the nineteenth-century periodicals acts as an

unspoken proxy for ‘tradition’ here.

Continuing in a similar vein, the reader of ‘Ezra Peden’, the first tale proper in the volume, finds themselves loaded with propositions such as, ‘It is seldom that tradition requires any illustration: its voice is clear’, although in this case there is ‘something too mystical and hallowed to be sought into by a devout people’ (5–6). In fact, the story arrives hedged around by three competing sources of authenticity and/or explanation: tradition, truth and the imagination. Cunningham gleefully piles these one on top of the other in working towards the possibility of a conclusion:

Tradition always conducts Ezra and the mariner’s widow to this seldom frequented place: a hundred and a hundred times have I hearkened to the wild and variable accounts of the peasantry […] Truth contents herself with the summary of a few and unsatisfactory particulars: the dawn of morning came, says Truth, and Ezra had not returned to his manse. Something evil hath happened, said Imagination, scattering as she spoke a thousand tales of a thousand hues, many of which still find credence among the pious people of Galloway (26–27).

This sense of competing testimony, indeed competing epistemologies, works to thrilling effect in these tales, in sentences that jostle for position and cancel each other, producing an experimental demonstration of the effervescent magic of storytelling.

In the case of ‘Ezra Peden’, which is introduced as a peculiarly startling instalment of folklore/fakelore, we are told that ‘The most intrepid peasant becomes graver and graver as he proceeds, stops before the natural termination of the story, and hesitates to pry into the supernatural darkness of the tradition’ (6). This terminal irresolution, so wonderfully illustrated by the close of ‘Ezra Peden’ itself, is now seen as a defining achievement of Romantic short fiction, in which ‘a wilful spirit of experiment’ resists any ‘single form’.[34] Still, Cunningham’s writing, it should be emphasised, has a peculiarly iterative quality, particularly when viewed over the longer term. In ‘Ezra Peden’ alone, detectable influences include Scott’s Reformation novels *The Monastery* and *The Abbot* (both 1820) as well as his handling of the Covenanters in *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816) and Hogg’s rejoinder in *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818). In a more personal sense, the Dalzell mythos – here involving an allusion to Sir Thomas Dalyell of The Binns (1615–1685) – would reoccur in Cunningham’s work as a sign of aristocratic

degeneracy in southwest Scotland.[35] Similarly, images in this story such as a whirlwind on the Solway Firth, and indeed the magical transfiguration of people into horses, became a part of Cunningham's stock-in-trade.[36]

Nevertheless, the moment of the early 1820s, in which tales were circulating widely but retained their shock-of-the-new and a sense of vital indeterminacy, helpfully points us away from Poe's aesthetics of unity and towards one of *raw power*. The basic currency of a story in these terms is an *unco*, a disruption, a knot, anything sufficiently arresting to stick in the mind. Storytelling, here and perhaps more generally, is a cultural ecology in which the collective labour of writers and readers, or speakers and audiences, refines what does and does not work in a kind of survival-of-the-fittest that soaks in the morality, myths and ideologies of the host culture. It is crucially these earworms, the essential components of narrative DNA, that are subject to the process of transmission that Cunningham's tales model on oral tradition, and literally enact in the marketplace. This need not be limited to issues of plotting. In fact, what an echo of 'Ezra Peden' like mine above excludes is the fact that much of Cunningham's effect lies in his style, an immediately recognisable, heavy prose that flows in and out of the verse elements he incorporates in many tales. Equally, in formal terms, while unity and cohesion may well provide elements of a good story, *Traditional Tales* in its bicentenary year tells us that jaggedness and incompletion are often equally as addictive.

Thus as 'Ezra Peden' begins to drop off into its whirlpool of a conclusion, with details like 'he saw what ought not to be seen' and 'the unholy voices which at midnight sailed round the manse and kirk' being passed around by Cunningham's many hands in front of the reader's eyes – 'a thousand tales of a thousand hues' (pp. 26–27) – the story is breaking down into its embryonic elements, the irresistible hooks which are what finally matters in a tale.

(c) The Bottle Imp