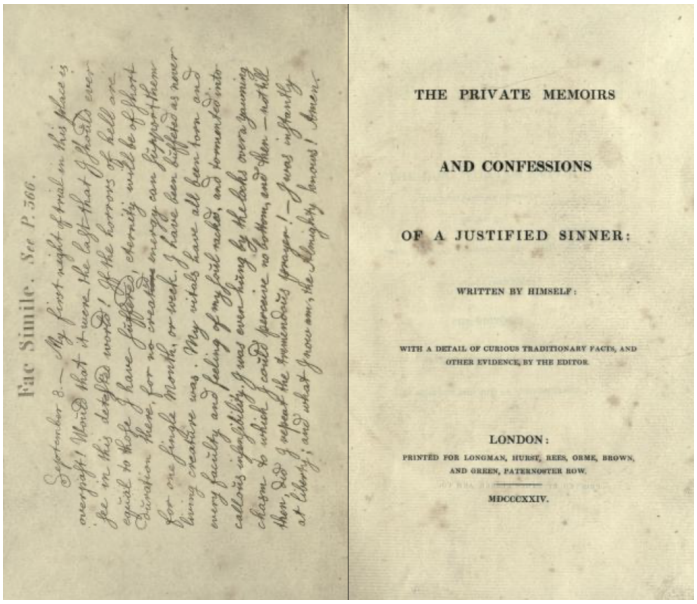
‘What can this work be?’: James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner

By Gillian Hughes



The question asked by the fictional Editor of Robert Wringhim’s ‘Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner’ is still being asked today, two hundred years from the first publication of Hogg’s *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in June 1824. A novel shaped by the pattern of Scott’s historical novels? A compendium of Scottish folklore about the devil and/or an account of progressive insanity? A Gothic novel along the lines of Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixir* (1815–16; English translation 1824)? Puritan autobiography in combination with hostile editorial commentary, as in Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe’s edition of James Kirkton’s *Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland* (1817)?[1] All of them appear to fit reasonably well to some extent, and the novel’s instability of genre was undoubtedly an important factor in the negative reviews of the work at the time of publication and in its fascination for our own age. For Hogg’s contemporaries it was the mark of his incompetence and for our contemporaries it is the mark of his ingenuity and originality. This special issue of *The Bottle Imp* provides a convenient opportunity to look at the work specifically as a memoir and in the context of Hogg’s account of his own literary life in his

‘Memoir of the Author’s Life’ in *Altrive Tales*.[2]

A half-title prefacing Wringhim’s own narrative describes it as ‘Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner. Written by Himself’, inevitably a double categorisation of this most duplicitous of literary works. A memoir is a record of events or history treating of matters from the personal knowledge of the writer, in this case an autobiographical rather than a biographical record. A confession, on the other hand, can be a creed, a formulary in which a church sets out the religious doctrines it considers essential, it can be a declaration of something hitherto kept secret, and it can be an acknowledgement of one’s faults, weaknesses or crime. Robert Wringhim’s narrative effectively embodies all three elements of a confession as well as being a memoir of his life, genres which Hogg employs variously in his other writings, but especially in his autobiographical ‘Memoir of the Author’s Life’.

Previously Hogg had set out the reader’s expectation of a confession in his weekly paper *The Spy* of 1810–11, in the final issue of which he revealed his true identity as a shepherd without formal education, placing this confession in equivalence to the last speech of a condemned criminal,

> *when he is obliged to speak, or for evermore be silent;—then it is that almighty truth prevails: of course, the last speech and confession of every person is sealed with a stamp so sacred, that the surmises of doubt are hushed to silence.*[3]

Mentioning ‘the surmises of doubt’ inevitably creates uncertainty as to the actual truthfulness of confessions under condemnation. Hogg employs a variation on this in his own ‘Memoir of the Author’s Life’, declaring that he will give the outlines of his life as if the reader were ‘the minister of heaven / Sent down to search the secret sins of men’ (p. 12) but warning too that his experience with the Forum debating society has let him feel ‘the pulse of the public, and precisely what they would swallow, and what they would not’ (p. 27). He also informs the reader of his inability to divest himself of an inherent vanity. His humorous opening (‘I like to write about myself: in fact, there are few things which I like better’, p. 11) indicates his self-awareness concerning his vanity, his objective recognition of that fault. In the subsequent narrative vanity is shown, however, as inextricably intertwined with the self-respect that has enabled Hogg to become a professional

author despite the difficulties in his way. Of his first publication, for instance, Hogg states, 'I knew no more about publishing than the man of the moon; and the only motive that influenced me was, the gratification of my vanity by seeing my works in print' (p. 21). The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the story of a great sinner who became a great saint, also emphasises self-awareness, Augustine's final conversion being immediately preceded by the break-through realisation that his unconscious prayer had for a long time been 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet'. In both cases the narrative is a progressive journey—for Augustine to conversion, and for Hogg to becoming the author of *Altrive Tales*, a multi-volume collected edition of the work of an established, classic British writer comparable to Scott's *magnum opus* edition of the Waverley Novels.

Self-awareness, however, is not a notable feature of Robert Wringhim's narrative in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and there is the complication that in a genre demanding truthfulness he is a self-admitted liar. 'I was particularly prone to lying' he admits of the period before his first encounter with Gil-Martin (p. 74), and later of his examination before a magistrate about his scuffle with his brother at the tennis-match, 'His declaration was a mere romance: mine was not the truth' (p. 112). As succeeding events are described by him, Robert increasingly becomes less self-aware rather than more so. He does not even attempt to give the reader an account of George's murder as he experiences it, but instead provides one told to him by Gil-Martin subsequently, though adding 'I will not deny, that my own immediate impressions of this affair in some degree differed from this statement' (p. 118). After his accession to the lands of Dalcastle Robert admits that he was 'in the habit of executing transactions of the utmost moment, without being sensible that I did them. I was a being incomprehensible to myself' (p. 125). In other words he has lost much of the agency upon which the reader of a confession or a memoir should be able to rely.

Both Hogg's 'Memoir of the Author's Life' and Robert Wringhim's 'Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner' relate a series of events in a sequence of writing that is not as strictly chronological as it at first appears to be. Hogg's own 'Memoir' is presented in three sections, dated to 1806, 1821, and then 1832, concluding with a section of 'Reminiscences of Former Days' that brings the events of his literary life close to the date of publication of *Altrive Tales*. The reflecting author of 1832, however, intervenes noticeably in the earlier portions of

his ‘Memoir’ to modify the conclusions drawn earlier or even to replace them. In 1801, Hogg declares, he believed himself to have become a good poet already and in consequence published his *Scottish Pastorals* on impulse. The author of 1832 then adds

> *in a few days I had discernment enough left to wish my publication heartily at the devil, and I had hopes that long ago it had been consigned to eternal oblivion; when, behold! a London critic had in malice of heart preserved a copy, and quoted liberally out of it last year [i.e. 1830], to my intense chagrin and mortification. (p. 21)*

Details of Hogg’s early literary productions given in previous versions of his ‘Memoir’ disappear in 1832, and new material is added tracing the mental development of an original genius, influenced by his awareness of James Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771–74) and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind* (1805). Hogg adds an account of his running races against himself on the hills as a child (p. 13), his falling in love with a country maiden (pp. 13–14), his writing songs for the lasses to sing in chorus (p. 17), and then a culminating moment of epiphany when in 1797 he first hears of the poetry of Robert Burns and resolves to become his successor. This is followed by a reminiscence of his declaration of this ambition to friends specifically dated to 1812. The reflective author of 1832 modifies the work of 1806, but without incorporating the new material and the old into a seamless narrative. Reading resembles the work of archaeological excavation, an uncovering of layers of pre-existing or co-existing material, a metaphor famously employed by Sigmund Freud for the discovery and examination of the mental processes that constitute the unconscious.

Robert Wringhim’s narrative also has a writing sequence that varies from its chronological sequencing of the events it relates, confirmed to the reader by the story of its excavation from his grave in 1823. It consists of two sections, the first in the form of a surviving copy of a pamphlet of material written and printed in Edinburgh and the second in the form of journal entries added successively to it by hand and specifically dated between 27 July and 18 September 1712. It was when casually employed in James Watson’s printing-house in Edinburgh, Robert admits, that he first ‘conceived the idea of writing this journal, and having it printed’ in what was clearly a last-ditch attempt to bolster his sense of self-worth. His work was written to ‘astonish mankind, and confound their self wisdom and

their esteemed morality' and moreover by being distributed in substantial numbers to give Robert himself the fame he had once hoped to win as the sword of the Lord, 'a name even higher than if I had been made a general of the Czar Peter's troops against the infidels' (p. 152). The opening paragraph of Robert's narrative is a renunciation of an earlier ambition, as he calls on 'the wicked of this world' to be thankful that 'the minister of heaven was removed from their sphere before their blood was mingled with their sacrifices' (p. 67). It is presumably therefore in the sense of authorship that the narrative opens with the claim that Robert was 'destined to act so conspicuous a part' in the world (p. 67). Authorship is what justifies in his own eyes his failure to become an effective man of action under the direction of his mysterious friend Gil-Martin. At the conclusion of the printed pamphlet Robert promises his reader 'a key to the process, management, and winding up of the whole matter' (p. 153), a key which is never supplied as the printed copies (with the exception of the single pamphlet retrieved from the grave) are burned as a medley of lies and blasphemies on James Watson's orders. It is at this point that Robert finally acknowledges, 'My hopes and prospects are a wreck' (p. 153) and his final descent into total insanity and/or religious damnation spirals to its conclusion in suicide. The conclusion of his last journal entry is a reference to the sole surviving copy of his pamphlet: 'I will now seal up my little book, and conceal it; and cursed be he who trieth to alter or amend!' (p. 165).

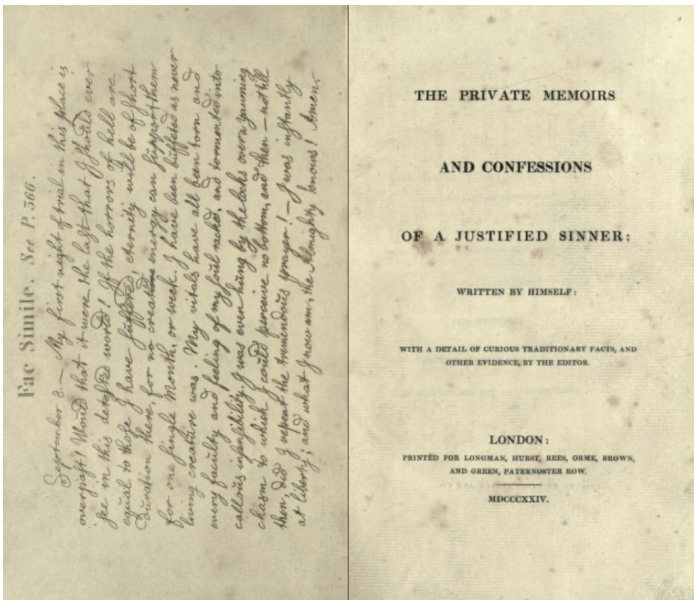
The final scenes of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* are those of excavation which fails to evoke meaning. A report by James Hogg himself is cited from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* on local traditions concerning the burial of a suicide more than a hundred years previously and recent attempts to disinter the body, which have resulted in nothing more than the retrieval of odd portions of its clothing. He then makes a cameo appearance in the final portion of the Editor's narrative in his Ettrick Shepherd persona, refusing to have anything to do with another attempt at disinterment by his literary friends, who recover Robert Wringhim's narrative without being able to understand its context or meaning. Hogg as author having refused his co-operation, the Editor, left to his own devices, plainly reveals his incompetence and even disingenuousness as interpreter. He declares, for instance, that he has let the pamphlet stand as it is and yet his transcription of the title in his final remarks as 'The Private Memoirs / and Confessions / of a Justified Sinner: /Written by Himself. / Fideli certa merces' does not accord with the half-title at the start of Wringhim's narrative, which excludes both the word 'Justified' and the Latin motto. His earlier assertion 'I

offer no remarks on it' (p. 64) at the conclusion of the acerbic and biased 'Editor's Narrative' that precedes the text of the pamphlet is also a self-evident falsehood.

Hogg's own 'Memoir of the Author's Life' is written as a success story, in despite of great personal and professional difficulties:

> *One may think, on reading over this Memoir, that I must have worn out a life of misery and wretchedness; but the case has been quite the reverse. I never knew either man or woman who has been so uniformly happy as I have been; which has been partly owing to a good constitution, and partly from the conviction that a heavenly gift, conferring the powers of immortal song, was inherent in my soul. (p. 55)*

In marked contrast Robert Wringhim's memoir is one of increasing suffering and anguish in which meaning finally evades not only its author, but its Editor and the reader also. James Hogg walks away from his own tale of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* leaving a perpetual yet irresistibly intriguing puzzle behind him.


Fac Simile. See P. 366.

THE PRIVATE MEMOIRS

AND CONFESSIONS

OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER:

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF:

WITH A DETAIL OF CURIOUS TRADITIONARY FACTS, AND OTHER EVIDENCE, BY THE EDITOR.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR LONGMAN, HURST, REES, ORME, BROWN, AND GREEN, PATERNOSTER ROW.

MDCCCXXIV.

The question asked by the fictional Editor of Robert Wringhim's 'Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner' is still being asked today, two hundred years from the first publication of Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* in June 1824. A novel shaped by the pattern of Scott's historical novels? A compendium of Scottish folklore about the devil and/or an account of progressive insanity? A Gothic novel along the lines of Hoffmann's *The Devil's Elixir* (1815–16; English translation 1824)? Puritan autobiography in combination with hostile

editorial commentary, as in Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe's edition of James Kirkton's *Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland* (1817)?[4] All of them appear to fit reasonably well to some extent, and the novel's instability of genre was undoubtedly an important factor in the negative reviews of the work at the time of publication and in its fascination for our own age. For Hogg's contemporaries it was the mark of his incompetence and for our contemporaries it is the mark of his ingenuity and originality. This special issue of *The Bottle Imp* provides a convenient opportunity to look at the work specifically as a memoir and in the context of Hogg's account of his own literary life in his 'Memoir of the Author's Life' in *Altrive Tales*.[5]

A half-title prefacing Wringhim's own narrative describes it as 'Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner. Written by Himself', inevitably a double categorisation of this most duplicitous of literary works. A memoir is a record of events or history treating of matters from the personal knowledge of the writer, in this case an autobiographical rather than a biographical record. A confession, on the other hand, can be a creed, a formulary in which a church sets out the religious doctrines it considers essential, it can be a declaration of something hitherto kept secret, and it can be an acknowledgement of one's faults, weaknesses or crime. Robert Wringhim's narrative effectively embodies all three elements of a confession as well as being a memoir of his life, genres which Hogg employs variously in his other writings, but especially in his autobiographical 'Memoir of the Author's Life'.

Previously Hogg had set out the reader's expectation of a confession in his weekly paper *The Spy* of 1810–11, in the final issue of which he revealed his true identity as a shepherd without formal education, placing this confession in equivalence to the last speech of a condemned criminal,

> *when he is obliged to speak, or for evermore be silent;—then it is that almighty truth prevails: of course, the last speech and confession of every person is sealed with a stamp so sacred, that the surmises of doubt are hushed to silence.*[6]

Mentioning 'the surmises of doubt' inevitably creates uncertainty as to the actual truthfulness of confessions under condemnation. Hogg employs a variation on this

in his own ‘Memoir of the Author’s Life’, declaring that he will give the outlines of his life as if the reader were ‘the minister of heaven / Sent down to search the secret sins of men’ (p. 12) but warning too that his experience with the Forum debating society has let him feel ‘the pulse of the public, and precisely what they would swallow, and what they would not’ (p. 27). He also informs the reader of his inability to divest himself of an inherent vanity. His humorous opening (‘I like to write about myself: in fact, there are few things which I like better’, p. 11) indicates his self-awareness concerning his vanity, his objective recognition of that fault. In the subsequent narrative vanity is shown, however, as inextricably intertwined with the self-respect that has enabled Hogg to become a professional author despite the difficulties in his way. Of his first publication, for instance, Hogg states, ‘I knew no more about publishing than the man of the moon; and the only motive that influenced me was, the gratification of my vanity by seeing my works in print’ (p. 21). The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the story of a great sinner who became a great saint, also emphasises self-awareness, Augustine’s final conversion being immediately preceded by the break-through realisation that his unconscious prayer had for a long time been ‘Give me chastity and continence, but not yet’. In both cases the narrative is a progressive journey—for Augustine to conversion, and for Hogg to becoming the author of *Altrive Tales*, a multi-volume collected edition of the work of an established, classic British writer comparable to Scott’s *magnum opus* edition of the Waverley Novels.

Self-awareness, however, is not a notable feature of Robert Wringhim’s narrative in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and there is the complication that in a genre demanding truthfulness he is a self-admitted liar. ‘I was particularly prone to lying’ he admits of the period before his first encounter with Gil-Martin (p. 74), and later of his examination before a magistrate about his scuffle with his brother at the tennis-match, ‘His declaration was a mere romance: mine was not the truth’ (p. 112). As succeeding events are described by him, Robert increasingly becomes less self-aware rather than more so. He does not even attempt to give the reader an account of George’s murder as he experiences it, but instead provides one told to him by Gil-Martin subsequently, though adding ‘I will not deny, that my own immediate impressions of this affair in some degree differed from this statement’ (p. 118). After his accession to the lands of Dalcastle Robert admits that he was ‘in the habit of executing transactions of the utmost moment, without being sensible that I did them. I was a being incomprehensible

to myself' (p. 125). In other words he has lost much of the agency upon which the reader of a confession or a memoir should be able to rely.

Both Hogg's 'Memoir of the Author's Life' and Robert Wringhim's 'Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Sinner' relate a series of events in a sequence of writing that is not as strictly chronological as it at first appears to be. Hogg's own 'Memoir' is presented in three sections, dated to 1806, 1821, and then 1832, concluding with a section of 'Reminiscences of Former Days' that brings the events of his literary life close to the date of publication of *Altrive Tales*. The reflecting author of 1832, however, intervenes noticeably in the earlier portions of his 'Memoir' to modify the conclusions drawn earlier or even to replace them. In 1801, Hogg declares, he believed himself to have become a good poet already and in consequence published his *Scottish Pastorals* on impulse. The author of 1832 then adds

> *in a few days I had discernment enough left to wish my publication heartily at the devil, and I had hopes that long ago it had been consigned to eternal oblivion; when, behold! a London critic had in malice of heart preserved a copy, and quoted liberally out of it last year [i.e. 1830], to my intense chagrin and mortification. (p. 21)*

Details of Hogg's early literary productions given in previous versions of his 'Memoir' disappear in 1832, and new material is added tracing the mental development of an original genius, influenced by his awareness of James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771–74) and Wordsworth's *The Prelude: or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805). Hogg adds an account of his running races against himself on the hills as a child (p. 13), his falling in love with a country maiden (pp. 13–14), his writing songs for the lasses to sing in chorus (p. 17), and then a culminating moment of epiphany when in 1797 he first hears of the poetry of Robert Burns and resolves to become his successor. This is followed by a reminiscence of his declaration of this ambition to friends specifically dated to 1812. The reflective author of 1832 modifies the work of 1806, but without incorporating the new material and the old into a seamless narrative. Reading resembles the work of archaeological excavation, an uncovering of layers of pre-existing or co-existing material, a metaphor famously employed by Sigmund Freud for the discovery and examination of the mental processes that constitute the unconscious.

Robert Wringhim's narrative also has a writing sequence that varies from its chronological sequencing of the events it relates, confirmed to the reader by the story of its excavation from his grave in 1823. It consists of two sections, the first in the form of a surviving copy of a pamphlet of material written and printed in Edinburgh and the second in the form of journal entries added successively to it by hand and specifically dated between 27 July and 18 September 1712. It was when casually employed in James Watson's printing-house in Edinburgh, Robert admits, that he first 'conceived the idea of writing this journal, and having it printed' in what was clearly a last-ditch attempt to bolster his sense of self-worth. His work was written to 'astonish mankind, and confound their self wisdom and their esteemed morality' and moreover by being distributed in substantial numbers to give Robert himself the fame he had once hoped to win as the sword of the Lord, 'a name even higher than if I had been made a general of the Czar Peter's troops against the infidels' (p. 152). The opening paragraph of Robert's narrative is a renunciation of an earlier ambition, as he calls on 'the wicked of this world' to be thankful that 'the minister of heaven was removed from their sphere before their blood was mingled with their sacrifices' (p. 67). It is presumably therefore in the sense of authorship that the narrative opens with the claim that Robert was 'destined to act so conspicuous a part' in the world (p. 67). Authorship is what justifies in his own eyes his failure to become an effective man of action under the direction of his mysterious friend Gil-Martin. At the conclusion of the printed pamphlet Robert promises his reader 'a key to the process, management, and winding up of the whole matter' (p. 153), a key which is never supplied as the printed copies (with the exception of the single pamphlet retrieved from the grave) are burned as a medley of lies and blasphemies on James Watson's orders. It is at this point that Robert finally acknowledges, 'My hopes and prospects are a wreck' (p. 153) and his final descent into total insanity and/or religious damnation spirals to its conclusion in suicide. The conclusion of his last journal entry is a reference to the sole surviving copy of his pamphlet: 'I will now seal up my little book, and conceal it; and cursed be he who trieth to alter or amend!' (p. 165).

The final scenes of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* are those of excavation which fails to evoke meaning. A report by James Hogg himself is cited from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* on local traditions concerning the burial of a suicide more than a hundred years previously and recent attempts to disinter the body, which have resulted in nothing more than the retrieval of odd portions of its clothing. He then makes a cameo appearance in the final portion of

the Editor's narrative in his Ettrick Shepherd persona, refusing to have anything to do with another attempt at disinterment by his literary friends, who recover Robert Wringhim's narrative without being able to understand its context or meaning. Hogg as author having refused his co-operation, the Editor, left to his own devices, plainly reveals his incompetence and even disingenuousness as interpreter. He declares, for instance, that he has let the pamphlet stand as it is and yet his transcription of the title in his final remarks as 'The Private Memoirs / and Confessions / of a Justified Sinner: /Written by Himself. / Fideli certa merces' does not accord with the half-title at the start of Wringhim's narrative, which excludes both the word 'Justified' and the Latin motto. His earlier assertion 'I offer no remarks on it' (p. 64) at the conclusion of the acerbic and biased 'Editor's Narrative' that precedes the text of the pamphlet is also a self-evident falsehood.

Hogg's own 'Memoir of the Author's Life' is written as a success story, in despite of great personal and professional difficulties:

> *One may think, on reading over this Memoir, that I must have worn out a life of misery and wretchedness; but the case has been quite the reverse. I never knew either man or woman who has been so uniformly happy as I have been; which has been partly owing to a good constitution, and partly from the conviction that a heavenly gift, conferring the powers of immortal song, was inherent in my soul. (p. 55)*

In marked contrast Robert Wringhim's memoir is one of increasing suffering and anguish in which meaning finally evades not only its author, but its Editor and the reader also. James Hogg walks away from his own tale of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* leaving a perpetual yet irresistibly intriguing puzzle behind him.

(c) The Bottle Imp