

The "Black Minstrelsy" in Scotland

Eric J Graham



Fig. 1. Thomas 'Daddy' Rice as the ragged Jim Crow character. *Early Scottish Maritime Exchange (ESME) Library.*



Fig. 2. American 'black faced' comedian Billy Van Ware in the later (1890s) sophisticated 'black & white' dress code. *ESME Library.*

On 10 June 1839, the 'Father of American Minstrels' - Thomas 'Daddy' Rice - made his first appearance on the stage of the Adelphi Theatre in Broughton Street, Edinburgh.¹ Ever since his arrival in Britain in 1835, Rice, a white comic actor from New York, had been an overnight sensation on the stage of the sister Adelphi Theatre on the Strand, London. 'Black faced' with burnt cork and oil, dressed in rags and with his toes sticking out of old boots, his manic buffoonery centred around his signature tune 'Jump Jim Crow' - complete with a comic dance 'rocking de heel'. Running for twenty one weeks, this novelty act was mimicked by street buskers and became a craze which caught the imagination of London's upper classes and visiting nobility.

At the end of his London contracts, Rice was engaged for an eight night appearance in Edinburgh by the dynamic local impresario William Henry Murray, who held a virtual monopoly on 'legal' theatres in the city.² By then Rice's solo act had been incorporated into a farce 'The Virginian Mummy' - one of three specifically written for him whilst in London - and showcased his latest character 'Ginger Blue, a Nigger'.³ Halfway through his run in Edinburgh, Rice added a new sketch 'Black and White or the Humours of Jumbo Jum - a literal [literate] nigger' and another new song 'Sich a Gitten up Stairs' to his repertoire.⁴ Rice returned to America soon afterwards, having made a small fortune as the self-proclaimed 'personator of the Negro character'.⁵ Despite his relatively short time in Britain he left

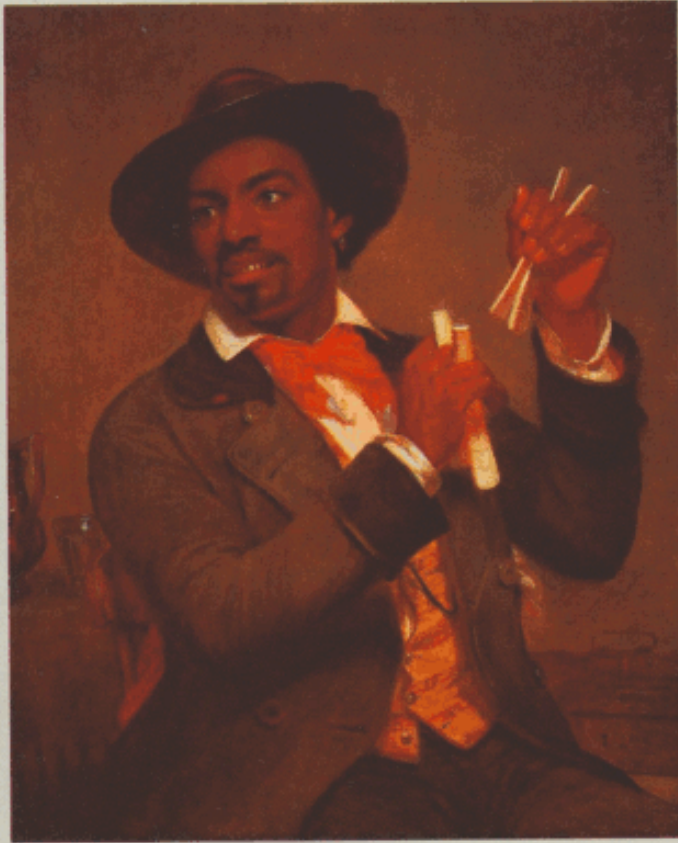


Fig. 3. 'The Bones Player' by William S Mount (1856), one of the first portraits to represent Afro-American features in a sympathetic manner. ESME Library.

behind an indelible set of stereotypes that were to be copied by successive generations of singer-comics in music hall shows, which peaked in popularity in the 1890s. Indeed, within weeks of his departure, a resident Adelphi singer actress, originally from London – Mrs Fitzwilliam – was performing 'Jump Jim Crow' but with her own additional stanzas.⁶

While the music largely took over from the comedy as the century progressed, the connotations behind the 'black-faced' act remained. The core of Rice's caricature of the American plantation Negro was that of a lazy and barely literate simpleton. What his audiences found hilariously funny in his character was the uninhibited wild gesturing, rolling eyes and an ever cheerful acceptance of his uncomplicated lower lot in life – so long as he had a 'yaller gal' to moon over. The implication behind the Jim Crow figure was that the American Negro, relieved of any weighty intellectual concerns by his limited mental capacity, was happiest, and indeed best served, by being left to the care of a patriarchal master: the gentleman plantation owner.⁷ This caricature played to the latent prejudices of his white audiences.

This specific model of racial typecasting was, of course, an American import, but there were deep rooted parallels in Europe. In the Scottish context, these can be readily traced back to the previous century and the ongoing debate on the morality of black slavery. Indeed, the great empiricist and philosopher David Hume had considered this very question and concluded that sub-Saharan African stock – the Negro – was an inferior race: one incapable of higher intellectual attainment and hence unable to fully integrate into white society.

Black Minstrelsy

Rice's act is now universally recognised as the precursor to the 'black faced show'. The first of these – the Virginia Minstrels – arrived at Liverpool from New York early in the summer of 1843. These self styled 'Ethiopian Delineators' were four white musicians – Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, Dick Pelham and Frank Brower – from the Bowery district of Manhattan.⁸ Building on Rice's caricatures but with new catchy tunes (led by Emmett's 'Ole Dan Tucker'), riotous dress, droll dialogues and slapstick routines, their act was an instant success and set the mould for a theatrical genre since referred to as 'the black minstrelsy'.

Their line-up set a formula followed by others: the fiddle and banjo players were seated in the centre, with the bones player (cow or horse ribs) and tambourine player as the 'end men'. Humour was provided by the ludicrous dialogue struck up between tunes by the end men – 'Bones' and 'Tambo'. One of seated middle players could also take on the role of the 'interlocutor'. The high point of the spoken humour was when he rose from his seat to open a supposedly serious discourse – the 'stump speech' – on such contentious matters as 'votes for women' or 'the science of phrenology'. Full of malapropisms, gags and puns, this pontificating spoof lecture was continually interrupted by the interjections of Bones, the dimmest in the pecking order, adding to the general mayhem.

Despite a four week run to full houses, the financial position of the Virginia Minstrels was never secured and the troupe broke up whilst still in London.⁹ Whitlock elected to return immediately to America, while the others chose to engage individually as musical turns with the circuses touring the provinces.

Around the same time in Edinburgh, the celebrated banjo player Joel Sweeney arrived from the Adelphi in the Strand on his solo tour. He had been a leading light in the Bowery theatrical circle back in New York.¹⁰ Like 'Daddy' Rice five years earlier, he was contracted by Murray to do the entr'acte turn for eight nights at the Adelphi in Broughton Street.¹¹ Sweeney's signature tunes were 'Jenny Get You Hoe Cake Done' and 'Knock a Nigger Down'. He was joined for his



Fig. 4. The notorious Jamaica robber 'Three Finger Jack': one of Aldridge's stock characters. ESME Library.



Fig. 5. Ira Aldridge in the role of Mungo from the play 'The Padlock'. ESME Library.

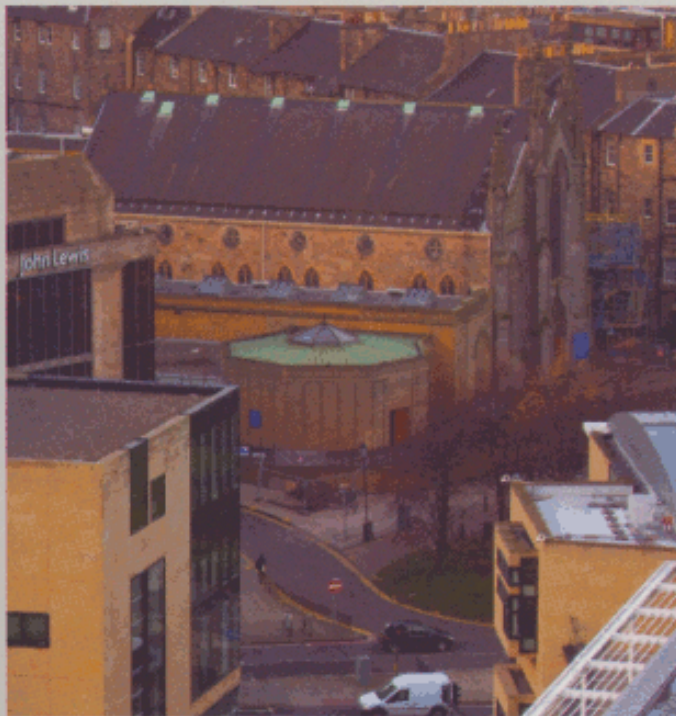


Fig. 6. No 4 Broughton Street site of the Adelphi Theatre. Since redevelopment as the annex to St Mary (RC) Cathedral and café. ESME Library.

last show by the bones player Frank Brower, previously of the Virginia Minstrels. The duo subsequently set out on their own tour of Scotland and North England. That winter, whilst in Lancashire, they met up with Dick Pelham and Dan Emmett who agreed to resurrect the troupe, but with Sweeney as the leader. Rebranded as the 'New' Virginia Minstrels, they first opened at the Theatre Royal Dublin in late April. Given their combined musical repertoire and virtuoso playing they were a guaranteed success and went on to play Cork and Belfast. Towards the end of the following month they crossed over the sea to perform at the Royal Theatre Adelphi, Glasgow Green. This was followed by a run of shows back in the Adelphi in Edinburgh and further morning performances at the nearby Waterloo Rooms in Waterloo Place. The tour finished with a triumphant return to Glasgow City Hall, after which they disbanded and returned to America.¹²

Such was the appeal of this type of act that, after their departure, two of the resident players at the Edinburgh Adelphi cashed in on the wave of popularity for 'black-faced' acts and put on their own 'Nigger Duet' that August. They were the versatile leader of the pit orchestra, Horatio Lloyd, who dressed up as the 'wench', 'Miss Rosa Doughnut', and the singer actor, S Cowell, who played her suitor 'Sambo Squash'. Their performance was accompanied by Tambourine and Bones and interspersed with a 'leettle Characteristic Dancing'.¹³

They were followed by a stream of American minstrel acts - arguable the best known being 'the Christy's Minstrels' who had first arrived in the north under the usurped 'Virginia Minstrels' title.¹⁴ By then the latest stage caricature 'Zip Coon' (a flashy dressed urban black dandy who sneers at the manners of his country cousins while bungling his own attempts to appear sophisticated) had joined the list of stock comic black caricatures.

Impact on the Credibility of Black Dramatic Players

One noticeable casualty of associating all black people with low intelligence and buffoonery was the career of the Afro-American Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, the 'Black Roscius'. Ira arrived in Britain from New York as a teenager in 1824 and promptly enrolled at Glasgow University for eighteen months under Professor Sanford, winning a gold medallion for Latin composition while training for his chosen profession as a thespian. The following year he committed the cardinal sin in the eyes of the pro-slavery lobby, by marrying a white woman from Lancashire.¹⁵

He first took to the stage of the Royal Coburg (now the Old Vic) in London in October 1825 under the pseudonym 'the Celebrated Mr. Keene, Tragedian of Colour'. He initially played a variety of light comedy parts - typically that of a black slave or house servant roles - such as the enslaved African Prince Oroonoko in 'The Revolt of Surinam or the Slaves Revolt' - with which he toured Edinburgh and Glasgow in 1827.¹⁶ In these parts his race and colour was almost acceptable to the leading critics. However some claimed that he could not properly pronounce English due to the 'thickness of his lips' and that he delivered his lines in a 'vulgarily foreign' accent. However, in March 1833, he took over the role of Othello from the acclaimed Edmund Kean who had collapsed on stage. From the outset Aldridge's performance unleashed a torrent of bigotry in 'the name of propriety and decency' as he - a Negro - was seen to 'paw' Desdemona played by a white woman (Ellen Tree).¹⁷ Such was the outcry that Aldridge was dropped by London's theatre promoters.

Forced to tour the provinces for the next nineteen years, Aldridge received great acclaim from his audiences. He first performed in slump-hit Edinburgh that April, in a benefit concert put on for the 'relief of distressed operatives'.¹⁸ Since the repeal of the prohibitive Theatre Acts in 1843 there had been a rapid expansion of theatres in Scotland. In his various northern tours of 1845-50 he played theatres in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Paisley.¹⁹ By then he had perfected a range of characters which he considered proof of his versatility as an actor. His decision, however, to play a serious dramatic role followed by a short comic farce on the same night, gave the more high-brow critics the opportunity to link his performance with the 'black-faced' acts. As the critic for the *Glasgow Dramatic Review* pronounced on his performances at the Royal Theatre in Dunlop Street, Glasgow: "yet he reminds us of him, when we seen him one night playing Othello and Mungo [in 'the Padlock']; another Shylock and Ginger Blue [in 'the Virginian Mummy']; and following these up by 'Jumping Jim Crow' ... but how is it possible to listen as you ought to the impassioned language of the noble Moor, when his representative is identified with those vulgar gesticulators, who caricature nature amid the boisterous yellings of excited tavern frequenters?"²⁰ His habit of singing a Negro song 'The Negro Hunt or Opussom Up a Gum Tree' with obvious emancipationist sentiments, at the end of his performances, no doubt rankled the pro-South lobby who were particularly influential in Glasgow.²¹

To avoid such criticism Aldridge cut back on the lightweight melodrama roles and added a cleaned up version of Shakespeare's

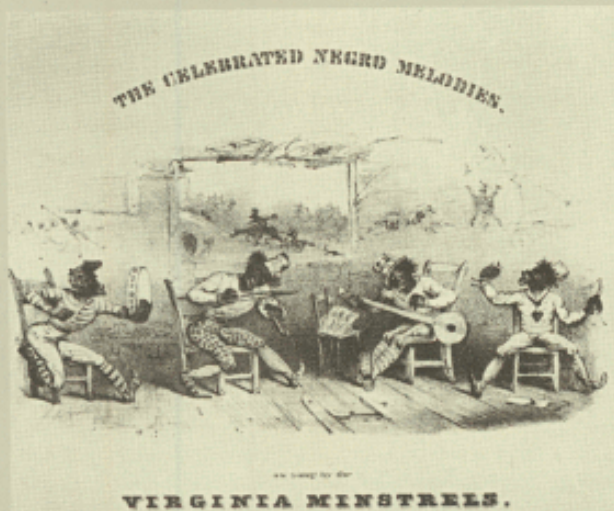


Fig. 7. 'The Virginia Minstrels', first of the 'black-faced' bands. ESME.

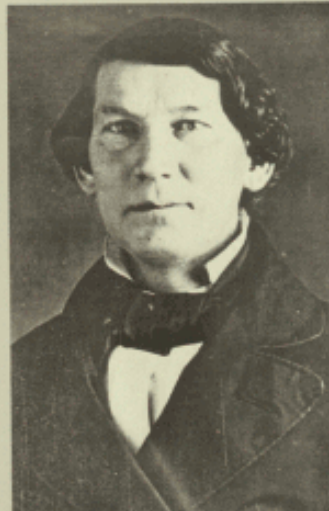


Fig. 8. The American banjo virtuoso Joel Sweeney. ESME.

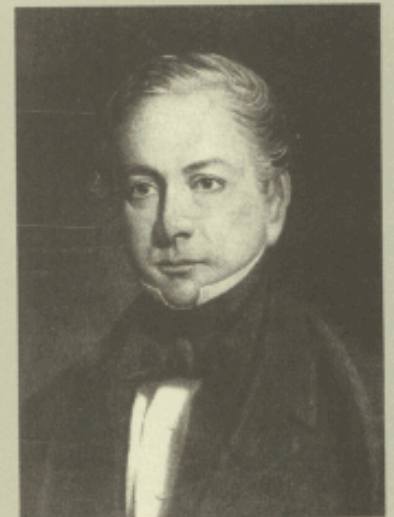


Fig. 9. The Edinburgh theatrical manager and promoter William H Murray. ESME Library.

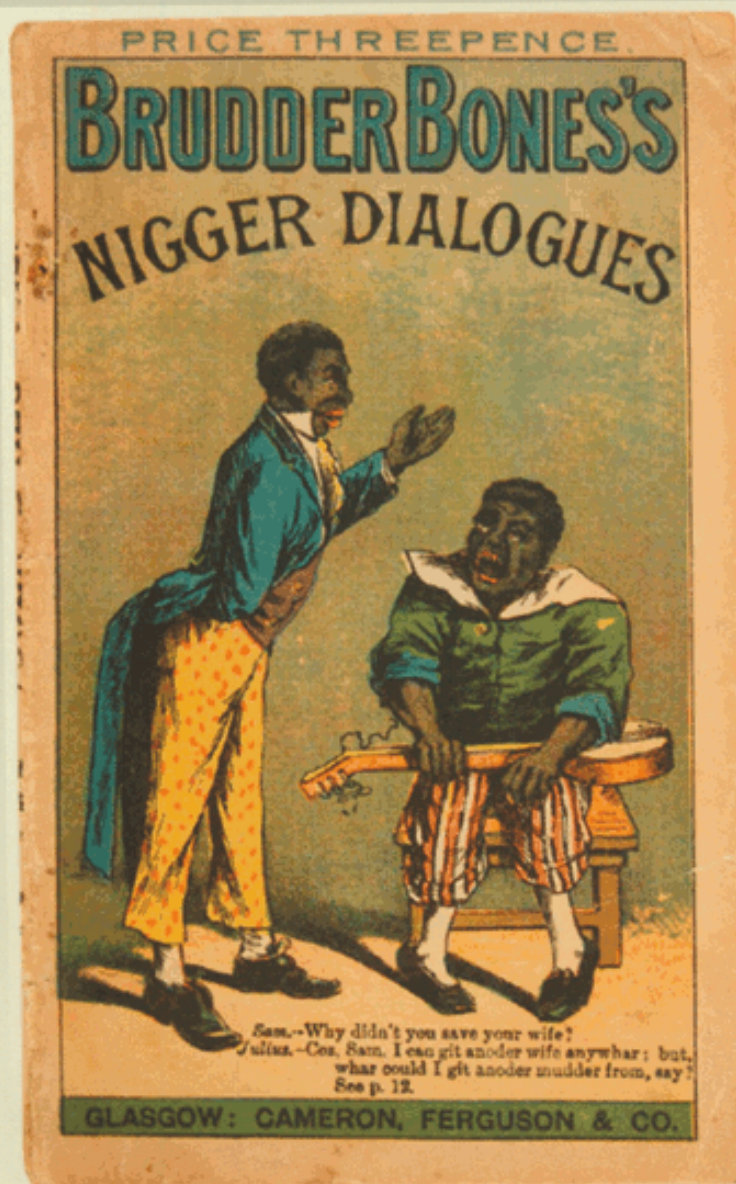


Fig. 10. "Brudder Bones' Nigger Dialogues" Gag Book, published by Cameron & Ferguson, Glasgow (c1870). ESME Library.

gruesome 'Titus Andronicus' to his repertoire, opening in Paisley in November 1849. Murray at the Adelphi Edinburgh, another firm supporter, lent his weight to the shift: "I think 'Othello' would be your best part, and the second 'Obi' and 'The Padlock'. 'The Black Doctor' produced no effects when we last did it, and I doubt its doing so now." On Aldridge's last night at the Adelphi in July 1850 Murray put on his 'Titus'.²²

With his new role perfected he holidayed in Scotland in the summer of 1851. He tried London in March the following year but found his talents still unwanted by the West End promoters. Subsequently, he left for Europe where he won the fame and recognition he so richly deserved.

The Emancipationists

Running parallel to the appearance of the minstrelsy in Scottish theatres and music halls was a great upsurge in support in Scotland for the emancipation of the slaves held in the Americas. Public interest had waned considerably once the great campaigns to end slavery in the British Empire and to scrap the apprenticeship extension had won the day (1834-7). Indeed, only the hard core of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Emancipation Societies, whose leaders were present at the 1840 International Anti-Slavery Conference in London, were still publicly criticising the domestic policy of the United States of America in order to bring moral pressure to bear to free her much oppressed slave population.

The spark that re-ignited national support of the emancipationist cause across Scotland was the 'Disruption of 1843'. This was the bitter schism within the established Church of Scotland, primarily over patronage, which led to a breakaway group forming the Free Church of Scotland. The latter had left the parent body without any property portfolio or assets with which to build their own churches or maintain its ministers. Part of the solution was to turn to their fellow Presbyterians in America for funds, a small amount of which was gifted by slave-holders. When this became public knowledge, a nationwide "Send Back the

Money' campaign (1845-6), tacitly supported by the Church of Scotland, was launched to denounce the Free Church's communion with slave owners and to demand the return of their 'blood money'.

This provided the ideal stage for the American emancipationists – led by the uncompromising William Garrison – to drum up support from a highly receptive Scottish audience. Without doubt the most commanding figure in their advance guard was the fugitive black slave Frederick Douglass. His striking appearance and forceful delivery of his message that 'slavery linked Scotland to America' greatly impressed his packed audiences – as did his debating skills, learning and statesmanlike gravitas on the platform, which blatantly contradicted the stage caricature of all Afro-Americans as 'dumb Jim Crows'.²³

On Douglass's arrival in Edinburgh in April 1846, he was immediately struck by his warm reception and absence of racial animosity towards him: "no insults to encounter here – no prejudice to encounter, but all is smooth – I am treated as a man and as an equal brother".²⁴ This was in stark contrast to the constant abuse and threats he had suffered in America and on his passenger steamer on the way over.²⁵

However, within months of the start of Douglass's campaign, Murray had put on his latest 'Negro Monster Concert' at Broughton Street. It featured a five piece troupe (a triangle playing stump speaker had been added to the line up) calling themselves 'the Real European Ethiopian Serenaders' and with the ever popular tune 'Lucy Neal' as their speciality.²⁶ This was a Boston act which had been hugely successful in London, putting on morning performances to satisfy the demand and even playing for the young Queen Victoria at Arundel Castle.²⁷ Likewise, as Douglass was leaving for America that July, Murray's latest offering to the theatre-going public of Edinburgh was a 'new nigger extravaganza, the all female Buffalo Gals Or 'Da Real Transatlanticum Etiopicum Serenadicums'.²⁸ The 'gals' (actors dressed as 'wenches') in the troupe each took their name from a popular minstrel song, led by the black character Lucy Neal. She was billed as 'a first rate bit of Black, and a regular screamer, four feet five in her stockings, a fast colour, and warranted not to wash'. The play bill publicity for this one act show proclaimed: 'The Burlesque will portray, in Speaking Colours, the state of the Nigger Populace in the Tropical Island of _____, American Speculations, Rise of Darkies in the European Market; and the whole will conclude with a GRAND AMERICAN AL'FRESCO NIGGER VOCAL AND HINSTRUMENTAL CONSORT' presided over by 'Signor Lloydcomicum', the resident comedian, and leader of the theatre orchestra - Horatio Lloyd.²⁹ It was a smash hit and ran for a record breaking thirty-one nights at the Adelphi from late July to mid September. It was reprieved by popular demand for another run at the nearby Theatre Royal (hired out to Murray) in late October.

In the interim, a comic ballet 'Poor Lucy Neal or the Yaller Gal and the Nigger of Alabama' was brought up from the Theatre Royal Lyceum in London to capitalise on the spectacular success of the Buffalo Gals. Billed as a morality play set with three tableaux, it followed the well used storyline of the cruel treatment of a female slave (Lucy) by her owner 'Jeremiah Cottonbags' after she had refused his advances. Her imprisonment along with her lover (the slave Mark Anthony) in a dungeon results in her



Fig. 11. The great American emancipationist Frederick Douglass. ESME Library.

tragic death. Displaying the double values so typical of the age, the advanced billing declared that the show will have 'Planters being able to pity as well as punish, the course of true lub runs more smoothly than anticipated – The Darkies are made happy, and the Spectacle winds up by the Nigger Corps de Ballet's performing A GRAND CHARACTERISTIC PAS DE MANY TO THE CELEBRATED RAILROAD OVERTURE'.³⁰

Douglass was in no doubt as to the immense damage done to the public's perception of the Afro-American by such minstrel shows and their spin-offs. The year after his return home, he recorded his utter contempt for "the 'Virginia Minstrels,' 'Christy's Minstrels,' the 'Ethiopian Serenaders,' or any of the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens."³¹

His verdict was well founded, as 'black faced' acts were the first exposure to black plantation or urban culture for the vast majority of Scottish audiences during the run up to the American Civil War. In the ensuing battle for 'hearts and minds' such shows plainly sent contradictory messages to the audience. On one hand, the uplifting melodies and sentimental lyrics stolen from traditional plantation songs often generated genuine sympathy for the sufferings of the black slave. On the other hand, the insidious humour lines and stump speeches with their mockery of the pretensions of 'the nigger' to rise above his station, undoubtedly reinforced the inherent racial bigotry of many.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin

What brought the whole black issue into sharp focus for many was the passing of The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 – dubbed the 'Bloodhound Law' by the emancipationists. This piece of legislation permitted the agents of southern slave holders to pursue their runaway slaves into the 'free' northern states and required the northern authorities to assist in their recapture and return to slavery. Those caught aiding and abetting a

VIVUM LA BAGATELLICUM.
FIRST NIGHT OF A NEW NIGGER EXTRAVAGANZA
AND FIRST APPEARANCE OF THE EXTRAORDINARY AND COMICALLY ORIGINAL FEMALE
FEMININE BUFFALOES!!



This present Evening, SATURDAY, July 3, 1847, will be revived POOLE'S Comedy, in Two Acts, entitled

TRIBULATION.

Sir George Faddle by Mr WILLIAM HOWARD.—Dorington by Mr MURRAY.—Forrester by Mr BEDFORD.
John by Mr BURTON.—Thomas by Mr HENRY.
Mrs Dorington by Miss COVENEY.—The Widow Dashmore by Miss CLEAVER.

After which will be performed, for the First Time in this City, the Laughable Extravaganza, in One Act, entitled The

Buffalo Gals,
Or Da Real Transatlanticum Etiopicum Serenadicums.

Old Joe, commonly called Melancholy Muggs, Esq., a Large Holder in the Nigger Line, by Mr RAY.
Edward Somers, a Young Youth over head and ears in the heart of Miss Louisa Muggs, by Mr VAUDREY.
Elias Herringbone, a regular Yankee out-and-out Specklator in all things, by Mr HONEY.
Anthony Napoleon Pompey Wellington General Tom Thumb, a Musical bit of Ebony, by Signor LLOYDICOMICUM.
Julicum Caesar, a confidential Nigger, by Mr BURTON.—Brutus Coriolanus, another ditto, by Mr HENRY.
Miss Louisa Muggs, a Linen-eal Descendant of all the Muggesses, by Miss MAY.

CORRECT LIST OF THE BUFFALO GALS,
OR DA REAL TRANSATLANTICUM ETIOPICUM SERENADICUMS,
PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY.

Lucy Neal, a first-rate bit of Black, and a regular Screamer,
Four feet five in her stockings, a fast colour, and warranted not to wash.
Diana Ginger Blue, Dinah, Sally Sucre, Mary Blanc, Missey Ole Bull, and Alabama Jemmymina,
All prime Sable Articles, and admirable Artistes on
The Banjo, Tambourine, Seraphinic-Fiddlenina, Triangle, and real African Bone-ettas.
The Barlesque will portray, in Speaking Colours, the state of the Nigger Populace in the Tropical Island of _____, American Speculations,
Rise of Darkies in the European Market; and the whole will conclude with a

GRAND AMERICAN AL'FRESCO NIGGER
VOCAL AND HINSTRUMENTAL CONSORT,

To aid the effect of which the Manager has Engaged, at a frightful expense, the celebrated
ANTHONY NAPOLEON ALEXR. POMPEY WELLINGTON GENERAL TOM THUMB,
WHO WILL, ON THIS OCCASION, PRESIDE A LA JULLIEN,
And Conduct the Voice-ical and Hinstrumental Amusements in the Orchestra.

PROGRAMME OF THE CONCERT FOR SATURDAY EVENING, JULY 3, 1847.
SONG. INDIVIDUALE AND CHORUS. TOOTEEY.

Fig. 12. 'Buffalo Gals' playbill, 1847. Edinburg City Libraries.

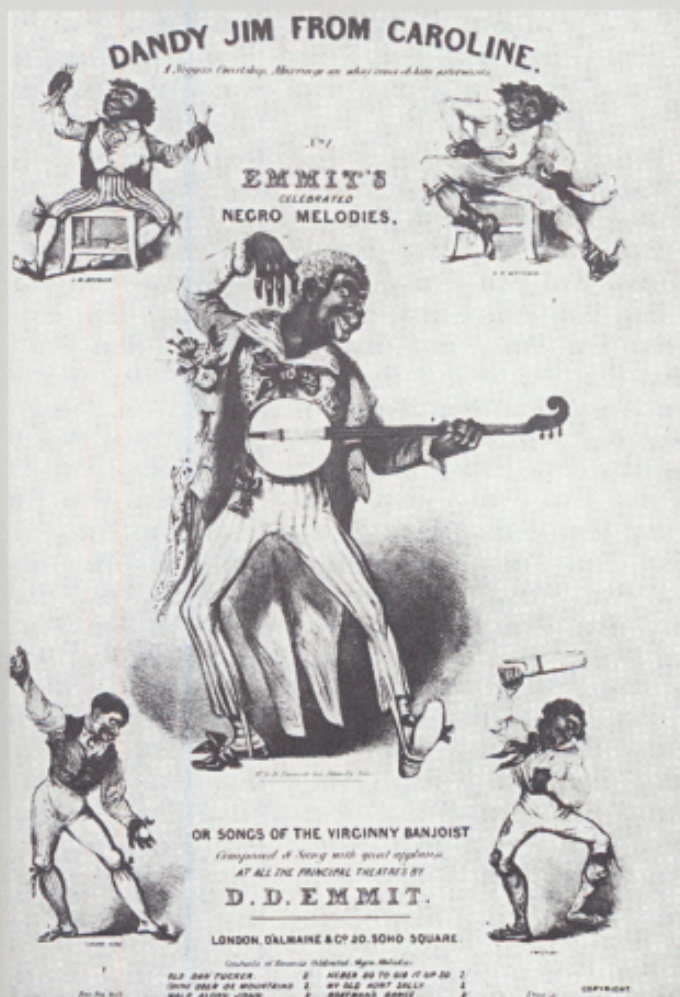


Fig. 13. The urban 'Dandy Jim' character (c1840s). ESME.

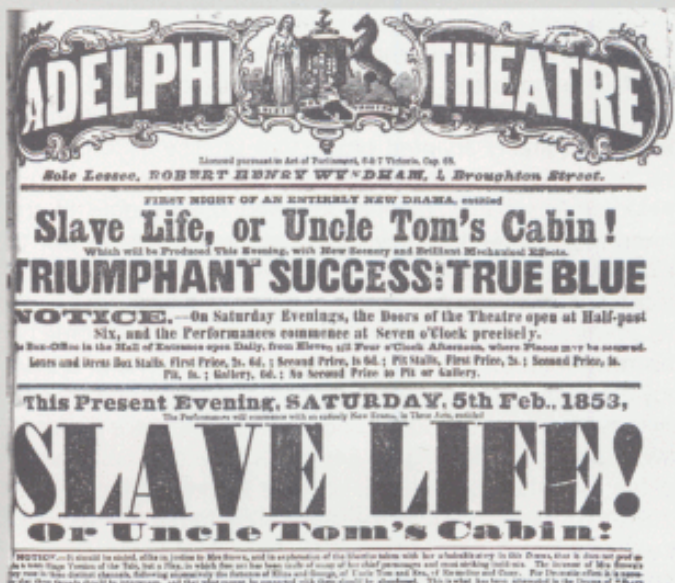


Fig. 14. The melodrama 'Slave Life or Uncle Tom's Cabin' playbill (1853). Edinburgh City Libraries.

fugitive were handed down severe prison sentences, whilst 'free blacks' living in the North went in constant fear of abduction and re-enslavement.

With the tentacles of slavery attempting to infest the new territories seeking admission to the Union, and the legal rights of black people – enslaved and free – rapidly deteriorating, Harriet Beecher Stowe penned her famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life amongst the Lowly* (published in 1852). This tale of the dignified suffering of a slave family at the hands of an inhumane system blew a hole in the image of the paternalistic southern gentleman slave owner which was nurtured by such newspapers as the *London Times* and the *Scotsman*. The book was a phenomenal success on both sides of the Atlantic. On sale at every bookshop and railway station in Britain it sold over one and a half million copies in its first year. Its impact on Victorian Britain was profound, dramatically swinging public opinion in favour of the emancipationists' cause.

The opportunity to dramatise *Uncle Tom* was seized upon by the new lessees of the Adelphi – the Wyndhams – who had taken over the theatre on Murray's retirement in November 1851.³² They had heavily invested in the theatre, refurbishing and extending the seating capacity that year. Sensing the change in public mood they put on a potted version: 'Slave Life or Uncle Tom's Cabin', with apologies to Mrs Beecher Stowe for the liberties taken, in the autumn of 1852. This full length play in three acts was produced by a 'Madame Celeste'

who claimed to have visited all the actual sites mentioned in the book. It was yet another import from the Adelphi in the Strand, London, where it was running simultaneously. Elaborate props for the Edinburgh production were acquired for the start of the new season of 1853. The play bill for its first night (5 February) boasted 'New Scenery and Brilliant Mechanical Effects' which included 'Blocks of Ice floating down the River' for the scene of the escape across the frozen Ohio River.

A month later Beecher Stowe arrived with her family in Scotland. She had come at the express invitation of the Ladies of the New Glasgow Anti-Slavery Society for what was to be one of the greatest public events of the decade.³³ Mobbed and lionised everywhere she went on her grand tour across Scotland, Beecher Stowe kept a diary of her travels which she later published.³⁴ In it she makes no mention of the play which, in various forms, was regularly performed in Scottish playhouses, well into the 1880s. Like her book, it received no royalties in Britain.

'Uncle Tom's' run at the Adelphi in Broughton Street was dramatically cut short. In the early evening of 24 May, a few weeks after Beecher Stowe had left to join the glittering company of the Duchess of Sutherland at her Stratford House home in London, a fire started in the theatre. Following its outbreak in one of the private boxes close to the stage, the building lay in ruins within an hour – along with, it must be presumed, the expensive mechanical props. The Wyndhams eventually rebuild the theatre, in 1857, and renamed it the 'Queen's Theatre & Opera House'. Electric lights were installed in 1859 to replace the hazardous candle and gas illuminations.³⁵

During the American Civil War, when slavery was once again in the public eye, the eloquent black American speaker, Sarah Remond, toured the cities of lowland Scotland shocking



Fig. 15. The 'American Emancipationist' (later Dr) Sarah Remond. ESME Library.

her audiences with reports of the sexual exploitation of slave women by their owners and describing the atrocities inflicted on slaves and 'free' blacks at the hands of bigots in the northern cities.³⁶ With such a stir in the air, the Wyndhams put on a suitably adapted production of 'The Octoroon' by the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault.³⁷ This highly contentious melodrama, set in Louisiana, followed the struggle of the mixed race Zoe and her lover George, the handsome heir to a debt-ridden plantation, against the evil schemes of their wicked neighbour - McClosky - who was intent on buying her at the bankruptcy sale and then forcing her to become his mistress. McClosky is finally exposed as a murderer of a slave boy after which (in the British version) the lovers finally make their escape from the South and its harsh inter-race marriage laws. This play, following on Remond's speeches, contributed to the escalation of the racial debate kicked off by Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom Cabin' exposé of slave family life. As such, it was highly popular with the local emancipationists. Disaster struck again, however, as another fire totally gutted the new building in 1865 - ending the use of this site as a theatre.³⁸

The 'Brudder Bones' Legacy

As the upmarket theatres gradually disassociated themselves from the crude racial humour of the early black minstrelsy, so the professional 'black-faced' companies touring the provinces focused on delivering high quality song and dance entertainment. The Christy Minstrels were in the forefront. Dressed in dinner suits, they were probably the first act which we would recognise as equivalent to the modern 'Black & White Minstrel Show' to tour Scotland.³⁹ The *Dundee Courier* reported on their sell-out performance at the city's Corn Exchange in December 1858:

"They are beyond comparison the most inimitable delineators of Negro characteristics and performers of their melodies we ever saw. What was musical entertainment was really good, skilfully executed, and in great taste; while the ludicrous was genuine humour, free of any low buffoonery."⁴⁰

The crude minstrelsy, however, still appeared in the drinking saloons of mid Victorian Scotland, and continued to ridicule the Negro in the eyes of the lower classes. The detrimental impact on popular perceptions was cumulative. Frederick Douglass returned to Scotland late in 1859, in the aftermath of the armed Harper Ferry Insurrection and the execution of its leader John Brown. With the Civil War looming, he was here to bolster support for Lincoln and to defend the American Constitution against its critics, led by Garrison, who claimed that it was incapable of delivering the end of slavery in America and should be torn up, along with the Union. Even in the short time Douglass was in Britain (he left Glasgow early in 1860 on receiving the news of his daughter's death) he noticed a marked increase in racial prejudice on the streets of the great commercial cities. This he blamed on "that pestiferous nuisance, Ethiopian minstrels", with their "slang phrases, the contemptuous sneers, all originating in the spirit of slavery".⁴¹ It is not known if he found time to see the next manifestation of the black minstrelsy - Pell's 'Negro Opera Troupe' - replete in full court costume and playing 'refined Negro music', who performed at Glasgow City Hall as part of their Scottish tour just weeks after he had debated the case for supporting the Union on the same platform.⁴²

After the American Civil War, the Glasgow publishers 'Cameron & Ferguson' cashed in on the world wide interest in both the music and the humour of the 'black faced' acts.⁴³ On the



Fig. 16. 'The Coloured Opera Troupe'. *London Illustrated News*, 1858.

one hand they published their Minstrel Song Books, with accompanying music sheets for concertina or banjo or violin, as part of the growing domestic market for family entertainment. These were catalogued in their Fireside Song Book, which included: *Adams Ethiopian Melodies; being a second series of the Popular Airs performed by Christy's Minstrels, Buckley's Serenaders and other Ethiopian Companies priced 6d.* On the other, they published the more insidious, 'Brudder Bone's Nigger Dialogues' gag booklets - such as: *Bones's nigger sermons and praktikal discourses to him darkey breddren; comprising patent lectures and siantifi addresses, abound in wit, yoomur, and sarkasm.*⁴⁴ Each was a distillation of the crudest of the 'Bones & Sambo' joke lines, along with a selection of the lengthier stump speeches, some of which blatantly mis-applied Darwin's 'Origin of the Species' (1859) and the fashionable pseudoscience of Phrenology, as expounded by George Combe of Edinburgh.⁴⁵ These booklets can be traced as advertised for sale in local newspapers in many of the far flung parts of the British Empire where the minstrel shows had toured, notably in Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁶

In America there was an upside to all this interest. By the late 1870s highly talented Afro-American musicians and dancers were being hired by discerning troupe managers as the black faced acts developed to large scale theatrical spectacles. Appearing on stage in front of white audiences for the first time, it was a breakthrough that even Frederick Douglass had to concede.

Although the popularity of Black and White Minstrel Shows in local British music halls peaked in the 1890s they continued with local amateur productions across Scotland. Even the more remote regions supported sell-out local minstrel shows. One such highly successful 'nigger entertainment' - with the butler as the master of ceremonies - was put on 1893 at the Glenfeshie Lodge on Baron Schröder's estate.⁴⁷ In Stornoway the naval and military personnel on Lewis put on a 'Grand Negro Entertainment' under the patronage of Lady Matheson.⁴⁸ In some areas the minstrel show became an institution, as with the Christy Minstrel Society of Maybole in Ayrshire.⁴⁹ The fad was enduring and even extended to Lerwick in the Shetlands, where the *Shetland Times*, in April 1910, reported yet another successful 'Dandy Darkey Coon' minstrel show, playing to a packed audience in the Town Hall. This performance followed the original 1840s formula with a 'black-faced' band enlivened by Brudders Bones & Sambo jokes, followed by a performance of the farce 'The Virginian Mummy' - all to 'thunderous applauds'.⁵⁰

One does not have to be so very old to remember the institution that was the 'George Mitchell's Black & White Minstrel TV Show' (1959-1978) which commanded audiences of 18 million in the mid 1960s. Considered a highly accomplished act in its day, it still has its imitators - though without the 'black-faced' make-up.⁵¹

Given such a historical pedigree stretching back well over one hundred years and the ongoing interest in the origins of racism in Scotland, it is surprising that there is no reference to 'black faced minstrelsy' in the standard works on Scottish theatres.⁵² Undoubtedly, local history societies can provide more evidence in their searches of local papers to illuminate this phenomenon which has since been deemed best forgotten.

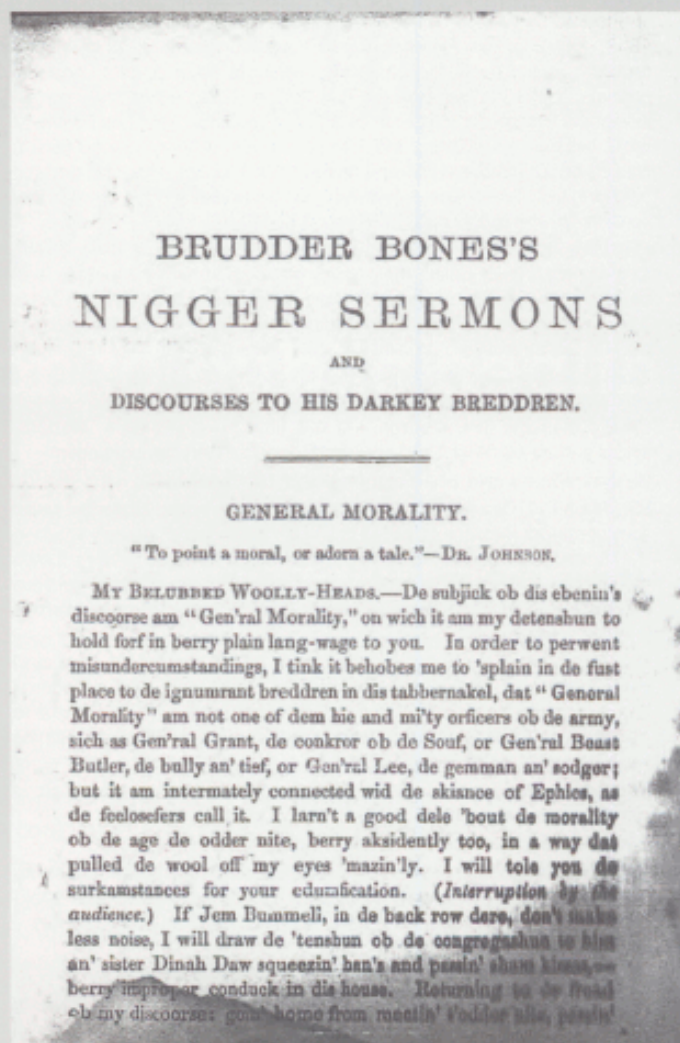


Fig. 17. Stump speech from one of the 'Brudder Bones' Gag books. Cameron & Ferguson, c1870.

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References

- 1 This study is largely based on the Adelphi play bills held in two folios by the Edinburgh City Library (ECL), YPN 2605. While few in number and spread over two decades they offer a sample of what was being staged prior to the American Civil War. The Adelphi was developed as a concert hall in 1793 for the Sadler Wells Company. It was later called after its next owner 'Mr Corri's Rooms'; changed to 'the Pantheon' and again to 'the Caledonia' and finally to 'the Adelphi' (1831).
- 2 Murray is perhaps better known as a friend of Sir Walter Scott and the theatrical genius behind George IV's grand visit to Edinburgh in 1822 which highlighted all things 'highland & tartan'. In theatrical history he was celebrated in his day as a gifted actor. He was originally the manager of the Royal Theatre, Shakespeare Square (site of the old General Post Office now redeveloped as the Waverleygate Offices). He was the brother of the owner - the actress Mrs Harriet Siddons - wife of Henry, the son of the more famous Sarah Siddons. Theatres then operated under a Royal Patent

- (introduced by Walpole in 1737 to control sedition), which was repealed in 1843. After acquiring the Adelphi from its bankrupt owner in 1830, Murray ran both theatres, with the financially precarious Royal staging upmarket dramas such as the ever popular 'Rob Roy' in winter, whilst the renamed Adelphi in Broughton Street ran as a highly profitable light entertainment music hall during the Spring and Summer months. Murray took his benefit concert on 22 October 1851 and retired to St Andrews where he died the following year. For a general overview, see: Bill Findlay (editor), *A History of Scottish Theatre* (Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 132-167.
- 3 This farce is based around a mad-cap plot by the love struck Colonel Rifle to gain access to Dr Galen, the grumpy guardian of his heart's desire, and dabbler in the secrets of ancient history. It involves the binding up of his black servant Ginger Blue as an Egyptian mummy supposedly brought back to life by a 3000 year old elixir.
 - 4 Rice's show was also supported by a 'Mr Gourlay', a local comic dancer who was probably the same Mr Gourlay who went on to become a theatre manager in Edinburgh. At this time managers were invariably actors in their own right and appeared in each others' productions.
 - 5 He was reputedly paid £40 a night whilst in London.
 - 6 ECL Playbill 1 October 1839. One of Mayhew's (the Victorian social commentator) informants noted Scottish 'black-faced' players working the streets of London in the 1840s; 'Some niggers are Irish. There's Scotch niggers too. I don't know a Welsh one but one of the street singers is a real black – an African'; Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and London Poor* (London, 2008), p.475.
 - 7 The term 'Jim Crow' quickly joined the other commonly used and demeaning racial labels 'darkie' and 'coon' which were then considered less derogatory than the highly offensive 'nigger'. It later gave its name to the southern states racial segregation 'Jim Crow Acts' of the 1870s which were only dismantled in the 1960s.
 - 8 New York was then the watering hole for the southern planter class in summertime and a conduit for their all important commerce.
 - 9 Gambling seems to have a persistent problem within the group.
 - 10 Sweeney is accredited with transforming the plantation gourd four string banjo into the five string stretched skin with steel ring modern banjo which became a favourite instrument with the Victorian middle classes.
 - 11 ECL Playbills, 10-18 June 1839.
 - 12 There are many websites on these performers. A good coverage in print is: E Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993).
 - 13 ECL Playbill, 23 August 1843.
 - 14 *Ibid*, 28 August 1843.
 - 15 Herbert Marshall, *Ira Aldridge – the African Tragedian* (London, 1958), pp. 48-9.
 - 16 His signature roles were 'Mungo' the cheeky drunken black slave in 'The Padlock' and Zanga the Moor in 'The Revenge'. As Fabian, a Creole physician in 'The Black Doctor' who marries a white lady aristocrat, he opened up the taboo subject of mixed race marriage – a topic that was later censored in Britain and America until the 1960s.
 - 17 *London Times*, March 1833.
 - 18 Marshall, *Ira*, p.77.
 - 19 Ira had a great admirer and supporter in J W Anson, director of the Dundee, Perth, Arbroath theatres circuit: *Ibid*, 167.
 - 20 *Glasgow Dramatic Review*, 11 February 1846, pp.333-6.
 - 21 Marshall, *Ira*, p.151.
 - 22 Bernth Lindfors, *Ira, Aldridge – the African Roscius* (New York, 2007), p. 114. Murray played his part in other ways, writing a dramatic version (in 1830) of Fawcett's novel 'Obi, or Three Fingered Jack' set in slave plantation in Jamaica.
 - 23 His charismatic 'pull' is demonstrated by the audience of 2000 who each paid 6d to hear him speak at the Music Hall, Edinburgh.
 - 24 Letters to Amy Post, 28 April 1846.
 - 25 The only incident he reported was in Belfast, where posters for his lectures were daubed 'Send back the Nigger'.
 - 26 ECL Playbill, 19 August 1846.
 - 27 William L Slout (editor), *Burnt Cork and Tambourines: a Source Book in Negro Minstrelsy*, (Wildside Press, 2007), p. 196.
 - 28 By a rough calculation based on the number of seats (known to be c. 1000 at the Adelphi) multiplied by the number of nights it played, it would appear that somewhere in excess of 30,000 people saw this act. See: Bruce Peter, *Scotland's Splendid Theatres* (Edinburgh, 1999) pp. 22.
 - 29 ECL Playbill 3 July 1847. 'Buffalo Gals' (1844) was the signature tune of the black faced minstrel John Hodges whose character was the dandy 'Cool White'.
 - 30 Play bill, 27 September 1847.
 - 31 *North Star*, 27 August 1848.
 - 32 Henry Wyndham and his wife Rosie Saker founded the northern Wyndham theatrical dynasty and appeared in many performances of their own productions in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Not to be confused with the Sir Charles Wyndham and his theatre in London.
 - 33 See: Eric J Graham, 'Uncle Tom's Cabin comes to Scotland' *History Scotland*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (2008), pp. 30-36.
 - 34 H Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories in Foreign Lands* (1854).
 - 35 George Baird, *Edinburgh Theatres, Cinemas & Circuses 1820-1963* (Private print, 1964), p.51.
 - 36 She was sent to Britain in 1859 by the American Anti-Slavery Society, the same year as Frederick Douglass, but was not part of his party as she was a supporter of William Garrison. She shared Douglass's abhorrence of 'vulgar men' who appeared black faced on stage. See: *Black Women in America: an Historical Encyclopedia*. Vol II, (Indianapolis 1993) pp. 972-4.
 - 37 ECL Playbill 21 February 1862. The play was first performed in America in 1859. Zoe, as the daughter of the old white planter by his 'quadroon' (one quarter African) black slave mistress, is an 'octoroon' and hence still defined as a slave under southern legislation. In the original American version, in deference to widespread anti-inter race marriage sentiment prevalent in the 'free states', the play ends with Zoe taking poison believing all is lost after McClosky's bid for her at auction wins. George arrives too late with the news that McCloskey has been arrested for murder and that his inheritance (including her) has been saved. She dramatically expires in his arms.
 - 38 See: J Grant, *Old & New Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1880). Vol.III, pp.178-9.
 - 39 T. Dumbolton's 'Ethiopian Serenaders' are usually credited with the first appearance in dinner jackets and white gloves.
 - 40 *Review Dundee Courier*, 22 December 1858. It was a large event – a special ferry boat to Newport on Tay and a train to Broughty Ferry were laid on for the homeward bound audience. I am indebted to the Local History Librarian, Central Library, Dundee for this information.
 - 41 *Anti-Slavery Review*, 3rd Series, VIII, pp.124-27.
 - 42 His adversary on the platform was George Thompson, one time MP for Tower Hamlets, who had been for years the public spokesman for the Garrisonites in Scotland led by the Wighams and Smeals. The Coloured Opera Troupe went on to tour north Scotland, appearing in the Northern Meeting Rooms in Inverness: *Inverness Courier* 31 March 1860.
 - 43 Ferguson became a full partner in the business in 1860, a year after his arrival from Ulster. He was the leading-light and spokesman for the Glasgow's Irish Home Rule movement. The publishing business address was 88 West Nile Street, Glasgow.
 - 44 The NLS has recently acquired a small collection of these booklets, all undated but certainly pre-1870: AP.1.210.01-5.
 - 45 Douglass met Combe in Dundee, as did Beecher Stowe, and was impressed by his support for the emancipationist cause.
 - 46 There are reports of minstrel shows in Te Papa, Tongerewa, New Zealand (*The Southern Cross* 29 June 1871) and in Brisbane (*Brisbane Courier* 16 September 1873). For example, the full range of Cameron & Ferguson *Brudder Bones* gag books were advertised in a book shop in Launceston, Tasmania, *The Mercury*, 23 May 1872.
 - 47 *Elgin Courant*, 29 September 1893. I am indebted to George Dixon for calling my attention to this news item.
 - 48 NLS, APS.3.209.40.
 - 49 See website: www.Maybole.org – history – social activities.
 - 50 *Shetland Times*, 9 April 2010, article 'Past Times'.
 - 51 They appeared at the King's Theatre 1964-6: NLS Mus. Box. 250. The 'Angus Minstrels' (previously the Angus Black & White Minstrels) are still performing but since 1960 without blacking up. See: the *Arbroath Herald*, 18 November 2010.
 - 52 Recent academic studies on the British experience of 'black minstrelsy' have very little to say on their appearances 'north of the border'. One view is that of Nathalie Rosset, 'The birth of the "African Glen": blackface minstrelsy between presentation and representation', *Rethinking History*, Vol. 9, no. 4, December 2005, pp. 415-428; a useful work on the general background is Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Ashgate, 2008).