

ESSAYS

“Death” at the Grassmarket

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Taking a free walking tour within the old town of Edinburgh will, no matter how many times you visit, give you a new impression of the old city. As a Scottish student living in Edinburgh, I did not realise how much I did not know about the lives gone by in this city. Throughout several of these tours, where we were introduced to historical persons and places, with their own stories, I found that it was the characters and personas of the tour guides that interested me the most.

Visible from her blue ensemble, it became apparent that being on a tour with Jen, our guide, could be an experience. The matching blue jacket and hat seemed reasonable enough, but it was the bright blue hair peeking out of the hat that hinted towards the eccentric persona that was slowly revealed.

By this particular tour I had completed half of the eight tours with different guides. Out of all the guides, Jen was the most intriguing due to her particular style. She was the biggest actress using characters throughout to help bring the stories of the past to life. Within a large open space, which may daunt many performers, Jen would encompass it all; occasionally attracting the attention of tourists that were not part of our tour group.

Jen eagerly walked down Victoria Street and into the square of the Grassmarket with the tourists trailing slowly behind. From the keen enthusiasm displayed by the group at the beginning, the tour had now become rather more subdued as we neared the middle coffee break. It was a February morning, and although the skies may have been clear it was cold! However, as was noted by both Jen and some members of the group, at least it was not raining. Even with the cold people always perked up as we reached one of the walk's designated destinations.

Stopping just beside a large stone, at the east end of Grassmarket, Jen waits for everyone to gather round before she begins the next tale. From past experience I knew which story was going to be shared but somehow still found myself waiting in anticipation. As the group forms a semi-circle around Jen and the stone, she steps up and stands upon it; creating her stage. Addressing the group, she begins the story of Maggie Dickson's execution from the early Eighteenth century. Similar to other stories, Jen acts it out dramatically. From the outset she changes the pitch of her voice depending on which particular character she embodies and uses wild arm motions to keep the group's attention. The visual aid she uses here is Maggie Dickson's pub. When asked, a tourist suggested it might be named such because her husband or family had owned it at some point. However she did not have any connection to the pub, apart from being hung from the gallows outside. Being with Jen you were drawn back to the day of the execution. Her details were so vivid and life-like that you were able to imagine the excitement of the roaring crowds; little children annoying adults and pushing their way through to see; multiple classes all mixing with each other just to watch the murder of a young woman.

Maggie Dickson, we learn, was to be executed for concealing her pregnancy. After her husband ran away she moved to the Scottish borders and begun an affair with a local innkeeper's son. It was with this man that she became pregnant but, due to its nature, she had to hide it. Her crime was only discovered once she abandoned the baby following a failed attempt to kill it. Yet after her hanging, on the way to the graveyard, the funeral director was startled by a knocking coming from within her coffin. Upon opening it, Maggie Dickson was very much alive albeit complaining of a sore throat. He returned her to the gallows where chaos ensued, the crowds now believed they were going to see their second execution of the day. An exceedingly rare event! But one young lawyer spoke up for Maggie Dickson. As she had already been declared dead, in the eyes of the law her punishment had been fulfilled. She was thus allowed to walk free. By surviving her hanging she also escaped from her failed loveless marriage; at a time where divorce was not an option. Mag-

gie then lived out the rest of her life with her new husband in a flat close to the pub. When someone else was carried to the gallows she was known to lean out of the window and shout, “Don’t worry, it happened to me and I’m alright now!”, pointing to the scar around her neck.

The tale of Maggie Dickson is, in a sense, completely unbelievable. Yet, through the way that Jen told it, it made complete sense. Like an actress, Jen adopted the character of Maggie Dickson. Throughout the tale, the emotions and behaviour of Jen changed as Maggie got closer to what was expected to be her death. In the minutes leading up to her execution, Jen emphasised how quiet Maggie became by lowering her voice; later she moved towards the front of the stone, flaunting the fact that she had ‘survived.’

Although she took on the role of Maggie Dickson, Jen did not ignore the other people in the story. With the most extreme accuracy, Jen emphasised the shock and fear of the undertaker as he found a live body in one of his coffins. The most impressive part of her performance was the way that each of her multiple roles received the same pizzazz. Maggie Dickson may have been the focus of the story but Jen could have easily twisted the perspective of the tale and it would still have been believable. Having someone like Jen narrate your death nearly 300 years later coming back from the dead sounds entirely plausible, especially in the era of Maggie Dickson.