

The Life and Times of Thomas Muir

Discovering the Story of the Father of Scottish Democracy



*"I have devoted myself to the cause of the People.
It is a good cause. It shall ultimately prevail.
It shall finally triumph."*

THOMAS MUIR - AUGUST 1793



Your vote has history

Nation et

The World of Thomas Muir

Few people in the western world today would disagree that democracy is one of the most significant concepts that shape our civilisation. But we should never take it for granted, for it was only established through some long-term campaigning and personal sacrifice by the democratic pioneers and there will always be people who wish to undermine it for their own ends. In his day Thomas Muir (1765-1799) was a renowned international figure. People around the world took an interest in his exploits because they recognised that he was one of the few people unreservedly promoting the idea of universal suffrage (everyone's right to vote). His speech at his political trial of August 1793 earned him fame across the globe.

Glasgow in 1765

When Thomas Muir was born in Glasgow in 1765, the city was a lively and interesting place. Its merchants were enjoying a period of great prosperity through their efficient dealings in Virginia tobacco, while the university was playing its part in the 'Scottish Enlightenment', which was gaining Scotland a reputation for leadership in intellectual thought. Both commerce and learning were flourishing within a stone's throw of the



Glasgow High Street in former days.
*Joseph Swan engraving, courtesy of East
Dunbartonshire Leisure and Culture.*

Muir family shop and dwelling place in High Street. The University was nearby and the gathering place of the tobacco merchants was just round the corner in Trongate, close to Glasgow Cross.

Religion in Eighteenth-Century Scotland

During the time of Thomas Muir the church played a much greater role in Scottish life than it does today. In the Scottish Lowlands almost everyone was of the Presbyterian faith. However, there was no unity among Presbyterians. Disputes over the democratic right to choose their own minister had led to the creation of breakaway churches, while in the Church of Scotland itself worshippers were divided between 'Moderates', who believed in obedience to authority, and 'Evangelicals' who stood by the right of ordinary people to choose their clergy in a democratic way.

The Glasgow Enlightenment

In Edinburgh the Enlightenment was closely associated with the respectful Moderates, who preferred the stability of a highly-structured, orderly, but undemocratic society. In Glasgow there was much less unanimity. Some of the University intellectuals were Moderates, whilst others supported the Evangelical 'Popular Party' of

the church. The Moderates included Principal William Leechman (of Auchinairn), while the Evangelicals included Professor John Anderson. A predominant influence was Adam Smith, who was a professor at Glasgow from 1751 until 1764. Smith's ideas covered many aspects of human life and were much more broadly based than the 'free trade' label usually applied.

Personalities

Some prominent local personalities emerged at this time. The Minister of Campsie, The Rev James Lapslie, set out his stall as an implacable opponent of democracy and its champion Thomas Muir, even though he had previously been very friendly with the Muir family. On the other hand, the Minister of Kirkintilloch, The Rev William Dunn, demonstrated his support for Muir. He even served three months in jail for removing three incriminating pages from the minute



The Rev James Lapslie.
John Kay portrait.

book of the Kirkintilloch Friends of the People. Another supporter of reform was John McFarlan, the Laird of Ballencleroch, Campsie Glen, said to have been a close friend of Thomas Muir.

Thomas Muir and the Balloonists

In January 1793 Thomas Muir was arrested on a charge of sedition. At



'Fowls of a Feather Flock together'. The meeting of balloonists Lunardi (centre) and Tytler (next left).

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that very time he was on his way to defend his supporter James Tytler, who had been charged with a similar offence. In 1784 Tytler had been the first man in Scotland (and Britain) to successfully ascend a distance from the ground in a hot-air balloon. The 'balloon' connection would have struck a familiar chord with the people of Campsie, for in 1785 another pioneer balloonist, Vincent Lunardi, had landed his balloon in the fields between Milton of Campsie and Lennoxton, where he was met by none other than The Rev James Lapslie. These were among mankind's first successful attempts to fly.

Steps to Democracy

Thomas Muir's Education

Muir entered Glasgow University in 1777 at the age of 12. This seems prodigious, but education was organised differently then and early entry to university was not uncommon. During this period of his life he was strongly influenced by Professors John Anderson and John Millar. He seems to have gained his democratic ideals from Millar, who wished to apply a standard of fairness to all walks of life, not just politics and religion. Muir abandoned his early intention of training for the ministry to study law instead, but he retained his deeply held Evangelical convictions. He became involved in university politics, supporting Professor Anderson in a dispute with the university authorities. Having fallen out of favour at Glasgow, in 1785 he moved across to Edinburgh University to complete his legal training.



Thomas Muir.
John Kay portrait.

Muir at Cadder

During the 1780s Muir moved with his father's household to Huntershill, Bishopbriggs, where he became an elder of Cadder Church. Here his democratic ideals first surfaced. He used his legal training to stand up for the rights of the congregation in appointing their minister, against the wishes of the laird of Garnkirk, James Dunlop. Muir's success was a noted victory, for he had to find a way round the terms of the notorious Patronage Act of 1712, which in general favoured people in high authority. Clearly, for Muir, democracy was an important concept. He was soon to apply its fundamentals to political issues as well as to the church.

The Friends of the People

At this time Scotland was an undemocratic country, even more so than England. Very few people had the right to vote. The country was controlled by a small number of aristocratic and powerful families. Prominent among these were the Dundases, including Henry Dundas, the British Home Secretary, and his nephew, Robert Dundas, Lord Advocate in Scotland. Inspired by the French Revolution of 1789, the year 1792 became a 'year of protest' in Scotland. Local reform organisations, known as Friends of the People, were set up in many parts of Scotland to protest against abuse of power by the country's



Extract from the Dunbartonshire plate of John Thomson's *Atlas of Scotland*, 1832, showing names of estate owners. *National Library of Scotland.*

leading families and to campaign for democratic voting rights. Thomas Muir played a key role in setting up many of the reform societies and the importance of his influence was widely recognised.

Muir in Kirkintilloch and Campsie

With Muir's personal involvement, Friends of the People organisations were set up in Kirkintilloch and Milton of Campsie in November 1793, followed by three more in

Campsie Parish alone. The local calico printing industry (at Kincaid and Lennoxmill) was then very new, and calico printers seemed especially keen to assert their democratic rights. Several of them were later called as witnesses at Thomas Muir's trial. Muir was at this stage 'returning to his roots', for the Muir family had long been associated with the community of Birdston, near Milton of Campsie. Local people welcomed him as their very own hero.



Views of Lennoxtown from South Brae at the time of the Lennoxmill print works (left), and today (right).

Historic image courtesy of East Dunbartonshire Leisure and Culture, modern image M. Ashworth.

Muir's Trial and Legacy

The Trial of Thomas Muir

In August 1793, Thomas Muir was put on trial in Edinburgh, on a charge of sedition. He quite deliberately used the trial as a platform to promote his ideas on democracy, which have since been recognised and celebrated in many parts of the world. However, with a hand-picked jury and a ruthless judge, Lord Braxfield, acting on behalf of the ruling families of the day, a guilty verdict was inevitable. He was sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay in Australia. He escaped from there, on an American ship. After an epic journey, across the Pacific Ocean, the Americas and the Atlantic, he eventually arrived in France, where he was celebrated as a hero. However, he never fully recovered from injuries sustained on his travels and died in 1799, still a young man. His activities left a continuing legacy for the parliamentary reform movement, and eventually large

memorials were erected at Calton Burying Ground, Edinburgh, and at Nunhead Cemetery, London.

Muir's Local Legacy

As confirmed in local history books and by contemporary newspaper reports, Thomas Muir's memory was cherished and his name revered locally for a long time after his death, especially in Kirkintilloch and Campsie parishes. This memory faded a little during the early years of the twentieth century, but since then an attempt has been made to revive the tradition. Memorials of different kinds are on display in Bishopbriggs Library and at Huntershill, where the Muir family home still stands as a place of pilgrimage for Muir enthusiasts and true believers in democracy. Other reminders will be found along The Thomas Muir Heritage Trail, set up by the Friends of Thomas Muir as part of their ongoing celebration of a truly remarkable life.

Thomas Muir timeline



Thomas Muir's trial speech

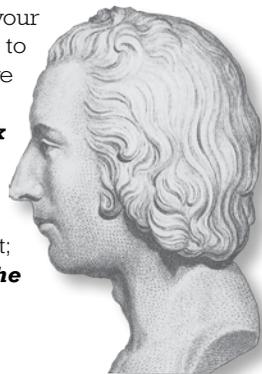
“ This is now perhaps the last time that I shall address my country. I have explored the tenor of my past life. Nothing shall tear from me the record of my departed days. The enemies of reform have scrutinised, in a manner hitherto unexampled in Scotland, every action I may have performed, every word I may have uttered. **Of crimes, most foul and horrible, have I been accused:** of attempting to rear the standard of civil war, and plunge this land in blood, and to cover this land with desolation. **At every step, as the evidence of the Crown advanced, my innocence has brightened.** So far from inflaming the minds of men to sedition and to outrage, all the witnesses have concurred, that my only anxiety was, to impress upon them the necessity of peace, of good order, and of good morals.

“What then has been my crime? Not the lending to a relation a copy of Mr Paine's works; not the giving away to another a few numbers of an innocent and constitutional publication; but for having dared to be, according to the measure of my feeble abilities, **a strenuous and active advocate for an equal representation of the People, in the House of the People;** for having dared to attempt to accomplish a measure, by legal means, which was to diminish the weight of their taxes, and to put an end to the profusion of their blood.

“From my infancy to this moment, **I have devoted myself to the cause of the People. It is a good cause. It shall ultimately prevail. It shall finally triumph.** Say then openly, in your verdict, if you do condemn me, which I presume you will not, that it is for my attachment to this cause alone, and not for those vain and wretched pretences stated in the indictment, intended only to colour and disguise the real motives of my accusation. **The time will come, when men must stand or fall by their actions;** when all human pageantry shall cease; when the hearts of all shall be laid open.

“If you regard your most important interests, if you wish that your consciences should whisper to you words of consolation, or speak to you in the terrible language of remorse, weigh well the verdict you are to pronounce.

“As for me, I am careless and indifferent to my fate. **I can look danger, and I can look death in the face, for I am shielded by the consciousness of my own rectitude.** I may be condemned to languish in the recesses of a dungeon. I may be doomed to ascend the scaffold. Nothing can deprive me of the recollection of the past; **nothing can destroy my inward peace of mind, arising from the remembrance of having discharged my duty.**”



1793

Arrested on charge of sedition
Travels to France while on bail
Trial date brought forward – Muir in absentia and outlawed
Struck off the Roll of Advocates
Returns from France, arrested and tried on 30th August
Sentenced to 14 years transportation

1794 Arrives at prison colony, Botany Bay, Australia

1796 Rescued by US ship and travels to Canada, Mexico and Cuba

1797 Injured in skirmish en route to Spain. Arrives France in November

1798 Arrives Paris then moves to Chantilly

1799 Dies in Chantilly 25th January

1793

1793 Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette executed. Burns writes 'Scots Wha Hae' with covert reference to Muir's trial

1801 Union of GB and Irish parliaments

1807 Slave trade abolished in British Empire

1800

1832 Reform Act

1838 Peoples' Charter

1843 The Disruption of the Church of Scotland

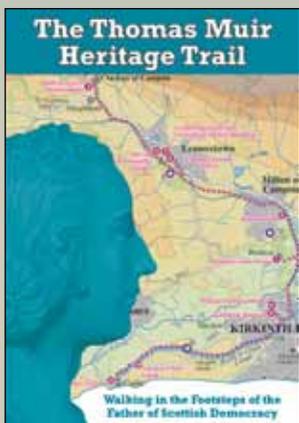
Thomas Muir of Huntershill (1765–1799)

was a leading light in ‘The Friends of the People’, a political reform movement of the 1790s, at a time when very few of Scotland’s citizens had the right to vote. He was tried and found guilty of sedition and received the harsh sentence of banishment for 14 years to Botany Bay, Australia. In silencing the man they created a martyr, and a hero to many.

For further information visit

www.thomasmuir.co.uk

East Dunbartonshire Information and Archives,
William Patrick Library, Kirkintilloch
Bishopbriggs Library



To find out more about places mentioned in this booklet, look out for the companion map of

The Thomas Muir Heritage Trail

an 18km walking and cycling trail through some of East Dunbartonshire’s most attractive landscapes, and towns and villages that have a direct link to the Thomas Muir story.

Further reading

Christina Bewley, *Muir of Huntershill* (1981)

Frank Clune, *The Scottish Martyrs* (1969)

Henry, Lord Cockburn, *An Examination of the Trials for Sedition which have hitherto occurred in Scotland*. 2 vols (1888)

Michael Donnelly, *Thomas Muir of Huntershill, 1765-99* (1975)

Hector MacMillan, *Handful of Rogues: Thomas Muir’s Enemies of the People* (2005)

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Cover image: Extract from contemporary copy of Thomas Muir’s death certificate, courtesy of East Dunbartonshire Leisure and Culture.

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