

PATRICK NEILL, DOYEN OF SCOTTISH HORTICULTURE.

Forbes W. Robertson

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REVIEW BY SALLY EVANS

Patrick Neill, subject of this book, was an Edinburgh worthy. He had a house with a sizeable garden in Canonmills, Edinburgh, where he grew newly imported plants and kept animals and birds. He was a bachelor and his business wealth (from a printing firm) allowed him leisure for his interest in natural history and science. He met James Hutton and William and Joseph Hooker, and became involved with the University of Edinburgh's faculty of botany and many other institutions. He was an acquaintance of Lord Cockburn and he is also portrayed in Kaye's Portraits (Modern Athenians).

He toured Orkney and Shetland as a young man where he saw the flora and fauna, and standing stones which interested him for the lichens. He published an account of that trip, adding inflammatory suggestions for social improvement in the islands.

Neill was an enthusiastic observer. His interest in sightings of various fauna did not exclude sea monsters and mermaids. His concern extended from shore to lighthouses. He also wrote about mining safety lamps, somehow typically preferring Murray's alternative design to the Davy lamp which became universal.

Fascination for anything scientific, from earth tremors to hailstorms to pocket barometers, run through his publications. A fossilised beaver? Neill was straight in there. Neill was involved in both the Wernerian Society and the Caledonian Horticultural Society (still extant), where all manner of robust in-fighting went on. He wrote on orchards, market gardening, and gentlemen's gardens for the Board of Agriculture and the First Statistical Account. He produced a catalogue with much information on varieties of apple and other fruit.

By now he was subscribing to plant exploration and receiving seeds from abroad from many contacts. In 1841 he presented a large collection of plants to Edinburgh's Botanic Garden. As convener of the committee to make Princes Street Gardens out of the drained Nor' Loch, he obtained gifts from many sources. He'd have been a great charities man. He was embroiled in huge rows with the new Railway authorities over both Princes Street gardens and his own land at Canonmills, in both

cases accepting a compromise after much battling.

After this he enjoyed an official trip to the gardens of Europe. His network of friends became immense. He was known to have an archive of personal papers which was passed to a clergyman after his death, and has since been lost. Accident, controversy or meanness, who knows the story?

This was the climate -- the freemasonry of gentlemen scientists -- which made life so dangerous for Darwin and Miller when they made their radical discoveries in natural history.

Neill just missed the thunder, though he probably heard it rumbling. He died in 1851. Hugh Miller died in Edinburgh in 1856, and Darwin, after working on his theory for 20 years, published the *Origin of Species* in 1859.

As a biography this is rather raw, presenting a huge volume of material and leaving the reader to work things out. But it is different, interesting and much in the mindset of its gentleman-scientist subject.

Sally Evans is a widely published poet and a keen gardener.