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“The Fiery Cross of Knowledge”: 
Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, 
1832–1844

ROBERT J. SCHOLNICK

In the “general preface” to his 1847 Select Writings, the prolific Scottish writer and editor Robert Chambers described his own transformation over the past fifteen years. Formerly a political conservative with “anti-quarian” literary interests, he now identified himself as a utilitarian and progressive, a writer concerned about the pressing issues of his society. He credited his work as co-editor and regular essayist for Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal (CEJ), the thriving weekly his brother William had founded in February 1832, for this change. Before joining William on the periodical in June of 1832, Chambers had written primarily on “the old tales and legends of my native country,” which he had explored with “passionate ardor” in such books as Traditions of Edinburgh (1822) and Popular Rhymes of Scotland (1826). But in addressing the needs of the periodical’s readers – many newly recruited to print culture – he became increasingly concerned with the problems of poverty, alcoholism, illiteracy, poor sanitary and working conditions, crime, and mental illness. Consequently, he came to identify with the philosophy of Bentham and the Mills: “Wherever human wo [sic] can be lessened, or happiness increased, I would work to that end – wherever intelligence and virtue can be promoted, I would promote them. These dispositions will . . . be traced in my writings. Some persons now-a-days have got into a way of speaking of such things as utilitarianism.” During this same fifteen-year period, CEJ became quite possibly the most popular periodical in Britain, with a circulation that in the 1840s surpassed 80,000. My purpose is to analyze the process by which Robert and William Chambers created a periodical that itself became an agent of growth and transformation – for its readers, the larger British society, and its editors. This essay argues that the character of CEJ during the twelve year period from 1832 into the beginning of 1844, which coincides with the
periodical’s First Series, was shaped by its growing commitment to promote progressive social change. Although prevented by the Newspaper Stamp Duties Act from commenting explicitly on political subjects, CEJ implicitly supported the political revolution initiated by the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832. Writing in the Edinburgh Review in April 1845, John Stuart Mill would comment that the Reform Bill “brought home for the first time to the present generation a practical consciousness of living in a world of change. It gave the first great shock to old habits. It was to politics what the Reformation was to religion – it made reason the recognized standard, instead of authority.” CEJ succeeded in precisely these terms, bringing home to its growing body of readers a “practical consciousness of living in a world of change.” In its treatment of questions of public policy, it insisted that “reason [be] the recognized standard.” Still, in developing a periodical literature to appeal to new readers, the editors worked hard to insure that reading itself would be a pleasurable experience.

Bounded at the beginning by the Reform Bill, the period under consideration concludes in 1844, shortly after the Disruption in the Church of Scotland in May 1843, when Evangelicals, led by Thomas Chalmers, left the established church. The effect was to lessen the authority of the “Kirk from a national to a sectarian body, unqualified to act as the sole dispenser of poor relief.” Since CEJ criticized the policy of relying on the Kirk as the agent of poor relief and had called for governmental bodies throughout Britain to assume greater responsibility for public welfare, the Disruption confirmed the Chamberses’ position on the need to implement scientifically based and government-supported systems of welfare. The period is bounded as well by another dramatic event, one which also had the effect of precipitating the transformation of Britain into a modern, secular state: Robert Chambers’s anonymous publication in October 1844 of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation, his most important and best-known work. Drawn in large part from Chambers’s essays for CEJ, Vestiges created a publishing sensation when it was released by the courageous London publisher John Churchill. The first complete exposition of evolutionary theory in English, Vestiges accounted for the creation and continuing development of the physical and organic worlds entirely through the operation of natural laws, not the direct acts of the Deity through Special Creation. In arguing that meliorative change coming from the bottom up was at work throughout the cosmos, Vestiges offered a scientific model for the progressive, humane society for which Robert and William Chambers were campaigning in CEJ.

The first of this paper’s five sections treats the key roles of CEJ and of the highly successful publishing firm established by the Chambers brothers in the literacy revolution. An examination of the fierce ideological battles over literacy during the 1830s shows how the Chamberses posi-
tioned *CEJ* as a secular, non-political voice devoted to creating readers. As the Chamberses never tired of arguing, everything depended upon education. If *CEJ* and W. & R. Chambers had not succeeded in creating readers, then the magazine’s progressive social policy would not have been possible.

In turn, the Chamberses’ success in reaching hundreds of thousands and perhaps even millions of readers was made possible by their ability to exploit what they described in *CEJ* as the “great revolution [that] has taken place in the business of the printer” (IV:175:149). Only by utilizing the latest technologies, including the steam press, stereotyping, and paper-making machinery, could the Chamberses publish and distribute profitably vast quantities of inexpensive reading materials, even while investing in still more efficient technologies and undertaking more ambitious projects. This is the subject of the paper’s second section, which treats the Chamberses’ advocacy of a socially responsible capitalism as the best means of increasing economic productivity, thereby providing the resources to improve the living standards of those at the bottom of the economic order.

The third section examines *CEJ*’s creation of a non-didactic, secular periodical literature. Nevertheless, *CEJ*’s high moral purpose, its commitment to promoting universal literacy and to finding community-based solutions to social problems, grew out of a distinctively Scottish Presbyterian tradition.

The fourth section identifies some of the ways that *CEJ* became an agent of change and transformation for editors and readers alike. The editors spoke proudly of the growing depth and range of their periodical, but to the extent that *CEJ* grew in complexity, it left behind a certain number of potential readers. However, given the extent of poverty and widespread functional illiteracy (especially in England), the Chamberses argued that it would be impossible for *CEJ* to attract significant numbers of readers from the working classes.

The essay concludes with a discussion of the Chamberses’ presentation of their firm as a model industrial enterprise. They promoted habits of responsibility, thrift, savings, and education among their employees, for whom they provided steady employment in healthful working conditions at decent wages. In a time of widespread labor unrest, they sought to define the attributes of a responsible capitalism, which, in concert with an activist government, could address the desperate plight of the poor.

1. “Cheap Literature,” Reform, and the Creation of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*

Appearing first on February 4, 1832, *CEJ* was the pioneering periodical in
the “cheap” literature movement, which aimed to bring respectable reading material to new readers at a cost they could afford. Its chief rival, the Penny Magazine, sponsored by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), did not appear until March 31 of that year. Whereas the illustrated Penny, after racing ahead with weekly sales that reached as many as 100,000 and possibly twice that number, was suspended in 1846 after circulation had fallen to 25,000, CEJ gained steadily, becoming the most popular family magazine in Britain. It provided the material and intellectual capital for the firm’s other projects, including Information for the People (1833–35), a two-volume set of essays on the wide range of subjects about which any educated adult should have some knowledge, such as astronomy, China, education, geology, meteorology, and chemistry. This compilation, which would be revised several times, altogether had sales of “upwards of a hundred and seventy thousand sets — very nearly two millions of sheets,” according to William Chambers in 1878.

In the division of labor between the two brothers, William devoted his primary attention to running the business while Robert essentially took on the responsibility for directing the magazine, impressing his editorial personality on it. As Robert wrote to Leigh Hunt on April 15, 1834, William deserves recognition as “the originator of cheap respectable publications. . . . [He was] unquestionably the first to develop this new power of the printing-press.” Although William invented CEJ primarily to create readers from among the working and middle classes, he conceived it inclusively as a national organ that aimed to bring together individuals dispersed by region, religion, and class: “Nothing could afford me more unmitigated pleasure,” he wrote in the opening editorial, “than to learn that CHAMBERS’S EDINBURGH JOURNAL yielded equal edification and delight to the highest conservative party in the state, and to the boldest advocate of an universal democracy: or was read with as much avidity at the cheerless firesides of the Irish Roman Catholic peasantry, as at those of the more highly cultivated Presbyterian cottars of my native land” (I:1:11). William understood the transformative power of the printed word, its ability to “create” a nation by imaginatively uniting disparate communities and individuals. At a time of bitter class divisions and religious controversy, the Chamberses sought, as they wrote on January 31, 1835, to “re-unite the sympathies of the most opposite and most remote orders of the people — which can tell the great about the humble, and the humble about the great, and promote a spirit of natural human kindness amongst all” (IV:157:1). They claimed that CEJ was the first magazine to be published simultaneously in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. By thus articulating shared values, their periodical could serve the function of helping to create an inclusive, tolerant national community.

In his Memoir William wrote that CEJ was made possible by the height-
ened political awareness created by the agitation that led to the 1832 Reform Bill. Nevertheless, the 1819 Newspaper Stamp Duties Act prevented CEJ from treating politics. The tax of 4d. imposed on political papers was itself larger, William calculated, than his intended readers could afford: three halfpence. “On account of certain existing laws affecting the unstamped periodical publications coming out at briefer intervals than twenty-seven days,” he wrote in the first issue, “this Journal . . . will not be expected to contain any news of general events, or any political or parliamentary intelligence” (1:1:1). Still, through its very commitment to universal literacy, CEJ made a political statement. A month before CEJ appeared, the Tory Quarterly Review had branded as pointless any attempts to educate members of the laboring classes: “We do not believe that any education which it is possible to give them will ever render the working classes capable of thoroughly understanding, and, consequently, of being trusted with the regulation of their own interests, so as to relieve their superiors from the duty of guiding and protecting them.” Remove the negative and the sentence precisely defines the Chamberses’ goals. Put positively: they believed that through universal education, Britain could transform itself into a dynamic, just, and progressive state.

William recalled that initially Robert rejected his invitation to join in creating a magazine that would give a reputable literary character to what is at present mostly mean or trivial, and of no permanent value; but he, thinking only of the not very creditable low-priced papers then current, did not entertain a favorable opinion of my projected undertaking, was shocked even at the very proposal. With all affection, however, he promised to give me what literary assistance was in his power, and in this I was not disappointed. Robert no doubt suspected that a “cheap” periodical could not achieve high literary quality, but most likely his “shock” came from associating it with the resurgent radical unstamped periodicals, which were inciting worker unrest. Then the more conservative of the two, Robert had written to Sir Walter Scott on March 30, 1831, of his fear that such agitation threatened society with “revolution and vandalism.” As he acknowledged in that 1847 preface, Robert was then drawn to an older, feudal Scotland. Nevertheless, he could not deny his brother’s request for assistance with the new venture and initially wrote “almost the whole of the journal himself,” according to one account. Since contributors were not identified, he preserved his political cover. But Robert quickly warmed to the project and just five months later, on June 23, 1832, he allowed his name to appear on the masthead as co-editor. He also accepted William’s generous offer to become an equal partner in the parent publishing firm at
no cost to him. So began Robert Chambers’s transformation from conservative antiquarian to progressive utilitarian. There is nothing about his utilitarianism of self-interest, hedonism, or narrow calculation, but as has been said of the younger Mill, he “encouraged a sense of identification with others” in the confidence that “out of such identification would be born a commitment to find the best way to work for the common good.”18 That statement could just as well describe the brothers’ goals for CEJ.

In his Memoir William traced the explosion in demand for print culture to the reign of King William IV, 1830–37: “So far as the humbler orders were concerned, it almost appeared as if the art of printing, through certain mechanical appliances – particularly the paper-making and the printing-machine – was only now effectively discovered.” The best way to create readers was through periodicals, but existing sheets were merely “disjointed and unauthorized extracts from books, clippings from floating literature, old stories, and stale jocularities.” These periodicals also committed the “generally fatal” sin of appearing irregularly. In Edinburgh William did find a model: George Mudie’s Cornucopia. Since it sold for three halfpence and “contained a quantity of amusing matter, and in point of size, resembled a newspaper, it was deemed a marvel of cheapness; for at this time the ordinary price of a newspaper was seven pence. Eminently successful as a commercial undertaking, Mr. Mudie’s sheet, if properly conducted, could not have failed to be permanently successful.” But according to Chambers, Mudie’s “erratic” behavior caused it to falter.19

Born in Peebles, where their father, James, was a prosperous wool manufacturer, the ambitious Chambers brothers were anything but erratic. Business reverses forced James to move the family to Edinburgh, where, as Robert recalled in an unfinished autobiographical essay that has only recently been published, a succession of failures led to his demoralization and growing “indifference,” rendering him “particularly unfit for pushing forward in the world.”20 An alcoholic, the father met an early death, leaving his family on the verge of destitution. Forced to withdraw from school in 1816 at fourteen, Robert had to figure out what to do with his life, since he would no longer be able to train for a learned profession. The exit from formal schooling seems to have given him even more time for reading and conducting scientific experiments, which he did with a remarkable old Edinburgh porter, James Alexander. He and William steeled themselves against despair by engaging in “the most merciless ridicule of all common-place ideas and common-place people” and by determining that “whatever should be our fortune in life, our own careers should not be of a tame or ordinary kind.”21 Still, their father’s failures taught them that the virtues of hard work, sobriety, and probity remained essential.

In July 1818 Robert, only sixteen, entered business for himself, buying and selling books on Leith Walk, his stock coming from his own and his
family’s libraries. Quickly learning the trade, he earned a modest living. With time to read and write, he began publishing; *Traditions of Edinburgh*, released in 1824, was “the first ray of prosperity that had fallen on our unfortunate family in twelve years.” As he tells us in his *Memoir*, William too entered the book business, as reseller and printer, and published *The Book of Scotland* in 1830. From October 6, 1821, through January 12, 1822, the brothers produced a fortnightly, the *Kaleidoscope, or Edinburgh Literary Amusement*. The Edinburgh literary world was small enough to enable them to meet such participants as Scott, William Tait, founder in 1832 of *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, and the visionary but unlucky publisher Archibald Constable, whose *Miscellany* was the “first notable attempt to pull down the price of new or recent nonfiction from the heights to which it had climbed in recent decades.” Robert earned 100 pounds for publishing *History of the Rebellion* (1828–29) in this series. The reverses that had brought the family to Edinburgh proved fortuitous for the two brothers. Their experience of the Edinburgh literary marketplace helped first William and then Robert to see that great success was possible—provided they could negotiate the internecine politics of literacy that revolved just then around efforts that were being made to repeal the Government’s taxes on political publications.

Since the brothers believed that *CEJ* could best realize its goals of expanding literacy by remaining free of political debate and religious controversies, they elected not to challenge the Government’s ban on political comment in unstamped papers. It was not that they had no opinions on the great political controversies. In June 1832 they established a monthly, *Chambers’s Historical Newspaper*, which commented on public affairs from a “radical Whig and often unorthodox point of view,” and which sold for three halfpence. The object was to evade the ban on political comment in periodicals that appeared at intervals less than twenty-seven days, but this periodical was withdrawn in 1836, apparently under government pressure. Nevertheless, the Chamberses were convinced that only by keeping their flagship, *CEJ*, free of the divisive issues of religion and politics (subjects on which there was no shortage of opinion already in circulation), could they cultivate what David Hume had called “the social virtues,” which are “never regarded without their beneficial tendencies, nor viewed as barren and unfruitful. The happiness of mankind, the order of society, the harmony of families, the mutual support of friends, are always considered as the result of their gentle dominion over the breasts of men.” Robert Chambers would treat these themes brilliantly in his informal essays, the most distinctive feature of *CEJ*.

When William began *CEJ* in 1832 the “breasts of men” were inflamed, and he felt compelled to differentiate *CEJ* from the radical, unstamped periodicals by taking a pledge of social responsibility:
I have voluntarily, and unprompted, taken in my hands an engine endowed with
the most tremendous possibilities of mischief. I may have it now in my power to
instill the most pernicious opinions on almost any subject, into the minds of
almost three millions of human beings. But I see the straight path of moral
responsibility before me. (I:1:1)

He seems to have gone out of his way to disassociate CEJ from the
campaign of working class radicals to “smash” the Stamp Act and foment
direct political action. Only by widespread disobedience, they believed,
could the duties be repealed so that they would be able to “teach the
working man the dignity of his class and the right he had both to the vote
and to the products of his own labour.”27 Responding to this threat, the
Quarterly Review argued that since the laboring classes would never gain
sufficient knowledge “to effect improvement of their economical condi-
tion,” no purpose would be served by educating them. To insure social
harmony, cheap political papers must be kept from the lower classes.28

A prominent group of radical Whigs, including Birbeck, Place, Wakely,
Roebuck, and Bulwer sought the abolition of the Tax, introducing mea-
sures in Parliament in 1832, 1834, and 1835.29 They believed that the
expansion of literacy that would follow the availability of low-cost publi-
cations would promote social harmony and middle class values in the
working classes. Yet, there is evidence of bitter conflict within this group –
and a consequent lack of an effective strategy. In an essay on “Useful
Knowledge” in the April 1831 Westminster Review, John Roebuck merci-
lessly attacked the SDUK, referring to its authors and editors as “literateurs,
amateur authors, diletanti virtuosi, writing gentlemen, men of nice taste
and fastidious criticism, carpers at syllables, affected connoisseurs of style,
hunters after polished phrases and elegant periods.” These “are not the
class to educate the million,” for the fact is that “literary men, as a body,
have few feelings in common with the great mass of the people. Our
literature has been and still is essentially aristocratic.” He charged that the
SDUK had not been fully engaged in the battle for the repeal of the
“disgraceful” stamp act. William, as we will see, agreed with this diagnosis
of the failures of the SDUK, and may well have been encouraged in his
own plans for CEJ by reading it. But he could not agree with Roebuck’s
Gradgrindian prescription for inculcating literacy: that the “first grand
subject . . . on which the labouring population ought to be instructed, is,
what are the circumstances on which the rate of wages depends.” Such
instruction would insure that the workers understood the “importance of
the existence of property, and by necessary implication, of government,
and of rules of morality.”30 The Chamberses saw that to create readers,
they would have to offer something more enjoyable than lessons in such
subjects as the “circumstances on which the rate of wages depends.”
William knew how to read the marketplace. With both religious and secular publishers releasing “a perfect deluge of works, at a moderate price, designed for the instruction and amusement of the multitude,” he saw that “the public were not indisposed to support that in which they could have reason to place confidence.” The key was “confidence,” since readers would not trust a publication that contained coercive, sectarian doctrines or the arguments of a political sponsor. Responding in the first issue to what he called “the universal appetite for instruction which at present exists,” William asserted that CEJ would take its cue from readers themselves and supply to that appetite food of the best kind, and at such price, as must suit the convenience of every man in the British dominions. Every Saturday, when the poorest labourer in the country draws his humble earnings, he shall have in his hand to purchase, with an insignificant portion of even that humble sum, a meal of healthful, useful, and agreeable mental instruction... Whether I succeed in my wishes, a very brief space of time will determine.... It may, perhaps, be considered an invidious remark, when I state as my honest conviction, that the people of Great Britain and Ireland have never yet been properly cared for, in the way of presenting knowledge, under its most cheering and captivating aspect, to their immediate observation. The scheme of diffusing knowledge has certainly been more than once attempted on respectable principles by associations established under all the advantages of an enormous capital.... Yet the great end has not been gained. The dearth of publications, the harshness of official authority, and, above all, the folly of attaching the interests of political or ecclesiastical corporations to the course of instruction or of reading, have, separately or conjointly, circumscribed the limits of the operation; so that the world, on the whole, is but little the wiser with all the attempts which have in this manner been made. The strongholds of ignorance, though not unassailed, remain to be carried. (1:1,1)

Scholars have confirmed the validity of this position: “The common people, especially those who came under the influence of radical journalists after 1815,” Richard Altick wrote, “were quick to realize that the sugar-coating of religious and moral counsel concealed a massive dose of social sedation. This was true particularly of the popular literature emanating from the Anglican church, which was increasingly looked upon as the religious arm of the hated Tory government.” But where did CEJ itself stand? Since CEJ did not engage in explicit political comment, we have no convenient place for it on the ideological-political spectrum. One scholar observed in exasperation that “when we deal with gray areas of ideology – what, after all, was the social programme of Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal?... our confidence... fades.” Yet, it could not have attained such
popularity if it did not articulate the aspirations of a broad segment of the population. Unable to engage in partisan politics, it nevertheless addressed fundamental questions of public policy, documenting social divisions and poverty in a land of affluence. Unlike the unstamped, it did not attack capitalism, which it treated as a vehicle for social mobility and transformation—provided owners acted responsibly. CEJ sought to replace the rigidities of the aristocratic order by formulating a compact in which all parties—the government, industrialists, land owners, farmers, members of the working classes, professionals—acted for the common good. The key to economic and social progress would be universal education.

Such was the magazine’s initial success—sales approached 50,000 after a year—that at first the editors believed that CEJ itself could create a nation of readers. On January 31, 1835, they wrote grandiloquently that the weekly “still penetrates into every remote nook of the country; still travels from hand to hand over pastoral wastes—the fiery cross of knowledge—conveying pictures of life, and snatches of science, and lessons of morality, where scarcely any such things were ever received before.” Claiming “an extensive reception among the working classes,” they reported that in one Glasgow mill no fewer than eighty-four copies were regularly purchased by operatives and that CEJ “reaches the drawing-rooms of the most exalted persons in the country, and the libraries of the most learned; that, in the large towns, a vast proportion of the mercantile and professional persons of every rank and order are its regular purchasers...that it pervades the whole of society” (IV: 1:1). The phrase “fiery cross of knowledge” conveys the Chamberses’ almost messianic belief in the power of the written word.

Only five years later, however, they retracted their assertion that CEJ by itself could create a significant number of regular readers from among members of the working classes. No periodical could repair the damage caused by the nation’s prior failure to educate all of its citizens. On January 25, 1840, the editors corrected the misapprehension that periodicals such as their own were extensively read by the laboring classes—even though that had been and would remain a goal. Its readership came primarily from the various segments of the middle classes and “a class who may be called the elite of the labouring community; those who think, conduct themselves respectably, and are anxious to improve their circumstances by judicious means. But below this worthy order...our work, except in a few particular cases, does not go.” If the reason was simple, the consequences were sobering:

A fatal mistake is committed in the notion that the lower classes read. There is, unfortunately, a vast substratum in society where the printing-press has not yet unfolded her treasures. Some millions of adults of both sexes, in cities as well as in
rural districts, are till this hour as ignorant of letters as the people were generally in the middle ages. . . . Till it shall be satisfactorily arranged in what manner or form they shall be initiated in a knowledge of the alphabet, no possible benefit can be derived by them from all the efforts which may be made for their enlightenment.

(IX:417: 8)

In 1835, in a bold attempt to address the problem, the firm created Chambers's Educational Course, a series that would grow to sixty-four instructional texts. Its purpose was nothing less than to form “a complete Course of Education, physical, moral and intellectual – theoretical as well as practical.” Based on the phrenological theories of George Combe, the Course structured its pedagogical objectives around the perceptual capacities of students at various developmental stages. The ambitious Chamberses wanted nothing less than to expand education “from the limited field which it has hitherto occupied, to an application to the whole of the human faculties, and the bringing out into full efficiency, for the benefit of society, the best mental qualities of every individual composing it” (V:209 (Jan. 30, 1836):1). In 1840 William reported that twenty-one volumes had been published, and series sales had reached 100,000 annually (IX: 445 (Aug. 8, 1840) 23). One of these books, Robert Chambers's own *Introduction to the Sciences* (1836), would be “widely used in the schools,” selling “over one hundred and twenty thousand copies by 1849, even more than Combe’s *Constitution of Man*.”

We do not have room here for a full analysis of the on-going campaign for literacy that the Chamberses conducted in *CEJ*. However, the magazine did offer regular reports on education, including devastating criticisms of the attempts of the Mechanics institutes to educate tired workers by offering lectures on remote technical subjects. On June 9, 1838, it reprinted the address that the astronomer John Herschel had given five years earlier on the many ways that literacy could improve the lives of members of the working classes. Herschell did not neglect pleasure and enjoyment (VII:332:157–58). The only sound policy would be to provide each child with a comprehensive education – to enable him or her (*CEJ* supported educating women) to participate fully in the emerging, rapidly changing industrial economy.


Despite William Chambers’s stated objective of creating a periodical that would appeal to readers throughout the British Isles, initially *CEJ* was edited for the residents of Scotland, where it was distributed. The first issue included the beginning of a history of Scottish society, an essay on
agricultural conditions in Canada written to aid Scots farmers considering emigration, a short story, “Lady Jean,” an educational article on “Plague–Cholera,” and a sketch of a liberal Edinburgh writer and educator, Alexander Adam (1741–1809). The sketch opened by boasting that

Perhaps no country in the world, in proportion to its size, has produced so many eminent men who have risen from the humble ranks of life, as Scotland; and no species of reading with which we are acquainted can yield such striking instances of the value of honest perseverance, under the most adverse circumstances, as the biography of the individuals who have so distinguished themselves. (1:1:5)

It is surprising how quickly a magazine that began as a provincial publication became national.

On April 28, 1832, after only ten weeks, the editors wrote that the magazine’s “success has been such as to astonish even the most sanguine persons connected with it. The sale, which at first reached about fifteen thousand copies, has now increased so much, that of No. XI. thirty-one thousand were printed, of which five-sixths immediately disappeared from the shop of the publishers to answer the demands of the regular purchasers” (1:13:104). A market opened in England, but since it was prohibitively expensive to distribute copies there from Edinburgh, William entered into an agreement with the printer W. S. Orr to produce an identical issue in London for distribution in England, Wales, and Ireland. The editors reported on February 2, 1833, that “At the thirteenth number, an impression was commenced in London, which soon very nearly doubled the previous amount of sales.” The firm stereotyped plates for use in London and Dublin, thereby reducing the need to print surplus copies for later sale and saving the cost of resetting type. Success in the marketplace against growing competition provided “the best possible assurance to the Editors that the general success of the work is of a steady and permanent character” (II:53:1).

Shortly thereafter the Chamberses decided to invest £500 to create their own printing plant. The facility, which became operational in January 1834, brought enormous gains in efficiency and capacity. In keeping with the policy of enabling readers to comprehend the innovations that were transforming their lives, on June 6, 1835, the editors published “Mechanism of Chambers’s Journal,” a detailed exposition of the technical workings of the press and an argument for its social significance. They included a humorous account of the struggle, when the periodical was first begun, to produce sufficient copies to meet demand: “For some time after the establishment of the present work, it was printed by hand, the Edinburgh impression of twenty-five thousand copies occupying two presses night and day for six days in the week, there being eight men employed, four
acting as relief during the night.” Still, sufficient copies could not be produced and the pressmen were under such strain that “it almost appeared that human nature could not stand up against such violent labour. No amount of wages seemed able to cause the workmen to remain sober. The greater the urgency for the work, and the higher the price paid for its execution, the more extensive were the saturnalia that prevailed.” So frustrated were the brothers that they considered “removing the whole of our printing business to London,” where there would have been no production difficulties (IV:175:150). Instead, they improvised; their own firm set type, other companies, including the publisher of the New Caledonian and A. Kirkwood, did the stereotyping, and a third, Ballantyne, printed CEJ on its steam press. Since such makeshift arrangements were unsatisfactory, the Chamberses decided to create an integrated facility of their own.

Automation, they argued, brought benefits to all: readers, owners, writers, and even those workers who were no longer needed to produce CEJ. (The new press could be operated by only two men – with another to stoke coal – resulting in savings in labor costs for large press runs.) However, there remained ample work for the pressmen, since they were still needed to produce books and other projects requiring only limited press runs, where “hand-labour answers the end fully better than machines.” The Chamberses argued that “free trade . . . proves ultimately beneficial to all – the appetite for reading which sheets like the present create, leads to the reading, and consequently to the increased printing, of books, and that in most instances by presses wrought with the hand; thus machinery, instead of injuring, improves the condition of the workman” (IV: 175: 151). They would continue to use their own firm as an example of a mutually beneficial relationship between labor and capital.

The essay developed a still larger point about the educational, social, and even moral benefits of progress within the expanding industrial economy:

By the erection of steam-presses, the three grand requisites, speediness of execution, quantity, and cheapness of labour, are procured to an extent demanded by the necessities of the age, and without the aid of printing-machinery, the tide of knowledge and human improvement would be forced back, greatly to the injury of society. Nothing . . . within the compass of British manufacturing industry, presents so stupendous a spectacle of moral power, working through the means of inert mechanism, as that which is exhibited by the action of the steam-press.

(IV:175:151)

Responding to the complaint that cheap periodicals had reduced the demand for books, the editors argued that since some of CEJ’s new readers were moving on to books, they were expanding the literary marketplace. The installation of the new printing facilities also conveyed another kind
of moral lesson – about the capacity of resilient, inventive, and intelligent individuals to overcome the disadvantages of geography to create a commercial and literary powerhouse. The brothers did not have to move to London. Their press had been built in Glasgow “upon the engineering plans of Mr. Robert Gunn of Edinburgh.” In *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Public Wealth* (1804) the Scottish political economist Lord Lauderdale spoke of “the unlimited resources that are to be found in the ingenuity of man in inventing means of supplanting labour by capital.”

Although William criticized the SDUK and other publishers for attaching political and religious agendas to their publications, *CEJ* developed and came to embody its own social philosophy, of the benefits that an open, non-aristocratic social structure could bring to the community at large. The Chamberses themselves stood for a new class of enlightened entrepreneurs, individuals capable of creating wealth and knowledge and thereby leading in social transformation, provided they had scope to act. Since progress in the market economy depended upon intelligence, initiative, and knowledge of individuals from all classes, *CEJ* performed an essential and democratizing function in preparing citizens to participate in the expanding national economy.

The magazine’s critical posture was shaped by the fact that a formerly provincial periodical now found itself addressing readers from throughout Britain. As amusing as stories about the history and prospects of Scotland might be, a national readership required something more serious. In the intellectual and social vitality of contemporary Edinburgh and the heritage of the “Scottish Enlightenment,” the editors had at hand a rich source of ideas. Such thinkers as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, and Lauderdale had explored the connection between progress, liberty, and the market.

In many fields contemporary Edinburgh was the rival – if not the superior – of London; it was a hotbed of radical ideas, especially in biology. Coming to Edinburgh to study medicine, Charles Darwin worked with the early transmutationist Robert Grant, the likely author of an article on Lamarck published in 1826 in the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal*. As the historian of science Steven Shapin put it, although Edinburgh was “no longer capital of an independent Scotland,” in “cultural matters” the city “still functioned as the metropolis of a vast empire of science. Edinburgh-trained savants pressed out beyond the Scottish provinces to staff the medical and technical services of the British Empire, to found the new scientifically-oriented University College of London, and to instigate the establishment of several English ‘literary and philosophical’ societies and ‘Mechanics’ Institutes.” The Chamberses found themselves at the center of a vibrant and liberal intellectual culture.

More than any other city in Britain during the late twenties and into the
1830s, Edinburgh provided a tolerant atmosphere for the development of approaches to scientific investigation free from the constraints of Tory and Anglican assumptions. These approaches were especially supportive of working class aspirations. "It is telling that in Edinburgh," Adrian Desmond wrote in *The Politics of Evolution*,

an upsurge in materialistic thought occurred during the period (c.1826-33) when medical radicals – men such as Grant, the future Chartist Patrick Matthew, and the phrenologist Hewett Watson – first broached the idea of organic self-emergence. . . . These radicals attacking "Priestcraft" and espousing notions of self-determination and popular power welcomed a left-wing Lamarckian science or its equivalent. [Robert] Knox provided the perfect political metaphor in his zoology lectures; it was, he said, a self-created, self-creating world – ever alive, never decaying, never old.  

As Robert Chambers undertook his self-created, self-creating intellectual voyage from antiquarian to utilitarian, he would be attracted to such ideas and incorporate them into *CEJ* and *Vestiges*. They also reflected the aspirations of the classes for whom the Chamberses spoke: ambitious artisans, professionals, self-made businessmen, reformers, and the working classes.

Themselves self-made, self-educated business people and writers, the Chamberses were members of the emerging "mercantile middle-classes" in Edinburgh, which, according to Shapin, "began to reject the social privileges of Edinburgh's aristocratic and professional elite, to dispute their values, manners, and cultural dominance." Not surprisingly, they were critical of the "Tories, the University, the Established Church, and what [they] saw as intellectual obscurantism." Instead, they were attracted to materialist ideas and causes, particularly phrenology, led by Robert Chambers's friend George Combe, whose *The Constitution of Man* the Chamberses would publish in an inexpensive "People's Edition," of which "sixty four thousand copies were sold between October 1835 and October 1840, thus making up the largest portion" of the book's sales. More than simply a way of understanding the brain, phrenology appealed to members of this class as part of a larger movement for social reform encompassing such causes as

penal reform, more enlightened treatment of the insane, the provision of scientific education for the working classes, the education of women, the modification of capital punishment laws and the re-thinking of British colonial policy. Phrenology-based reformism in Britain was founded upon a social optimism which maintained that the manipulation of environmental factors could improve the human condition.
This reads as a list of CEJ’s causes.

Not coincidentally, 1832, which witnessed the passage of the Reform Bill and the creation of CEJ, also saw the establishment of the “Edinburgh Association for procuring Instruction in Useful and Entertaining Science.” The Edinburgh Whig Henry Cockburn observed in the journal that

This and other institutions are strongly characteristic of the times. It is a sort of popular unendowed college, where lectures are given to all, male or female. . . . The lectures are on botany, geology, chemistry, astronomy, physiology, natural philosophy, phrenology, and education. . . . It is a very useful establishment, giving respectable discourses very cheaply to a class of persons for whose scientific instruction and amusement there is no other provision. . . . George Combe is their genius.45

In taking the up the cause of useful instruction for all, CEJ itself became a circulating “popular unendowed college” bringing “respectable discourses” in science and other subjects at the lowest possible price to the many who saw the need for such instruction.

CEJ, then, brought a distinctively Scottish approach to self-improvement through education to the homes of readers throughout Britain. In doing so, it set out to demonstrate the practical benefits that could come from applying the pragmatic Scottish approach to problem-solving to pressing social problems. “An Improving Landlord,” published on January 30, 1841, begins with the observation that

Notwithstanding the great amount of mental energy that is daily consumed in cogitation and wranglings on abstractions that seldom come to any practical good, there exists throughout the country [Scotland], a principle of quiet and steady advancement in things really useful. There is a desire to have things done better than they were done formerly, to correct abuses, to save time and labour by shorter and simpler methods, and, generally speaking, a tendency to render every one’s condition more comfortable and cheering than it has hitherto been. (X:470:113)

The contrast between the enlightened social practices of Scotland generally with those of the Tory elite, particularly in England, helped to define CEJ’s critical perspective.

To draw examples from CEJ’s first year, “Popular Information on National Institutions: Schools,” published on August 18, 1832, stated bluntly that

It is now fully understood among inquiring minds, that in almost no civilized country in Europe is education less generally diffused, or ignorance more prevalent, than in England. It has happened through the extreme carelessness of those to
whose management the country was committed . . . that the great mass of people, whether in trade or agriculture, are totally ignorant of the first rudiments of letters, and have not the smallest knowledge of the art of writing. I have often been astonished at the quietness of the intelligent newspaper and periodical press under this melancholy state of things.

CEJ recommended first, that legislation be passed to prevent children under ten from being employed “in any kind of manufactory” and second that schools be established “in every parish, or lesser division, and supported in nearly the same manner as is practiced with triumphant success in Scotland” (1:1:225–26).

Similarly, the lead article for June 30, 1832, “A Chapter of Political Economy,” carried the sub-heading “Written for the British Peasantry,” reflecting both CEJ’s intention to reach members of the working class and its commitment to social justice. In the strongest possible terms, the author takes issue with what he calls a “detestable theory,” the use of Malthus to justify hunger, poverty, and social inequality:

The monstrous absurdity, that there is a principle in the economy of nature by which population increases beyond the means of support, has been stated by men eminent in various departments of political economy, and countenanced by individuals in whom the soundest reasoning and far-sightedness might have been expected. There is not a principle in nature having a tendency to increase population beyond the means of subsistence, or to over-people the world.

Rather, human beings and the institutions they have created must be held responsible: “Because, as must necessarily be the case, from the influence of regulations, a number of the people are in impoverished circumstances, and are not so well fed as their neighbors, it has . . . pleased a few men in this large mass of humanity to impeach the God of the universe, and to tell us that He creates millions of thinking beings only to put them to death by slow starvation.” The essay then offered a series of suggestions – both practical and visionary – for improving living standards: Emigration, is one solution, regulatory reform is another, and still another would be the substitution of mechanical power for horsepower in transportation, which would free foodstuffs for humans. It’s a matter of Scottish common sense and the willingness to solve problems: “The[se] very simple facts . . . might, I think, convince every one who does not prefer the mystifications of theorists to plain sense and plain truth, that the doctrine as to the means of subsistence having a constant disposition to fall beneath the demand for food, rests on no sure foundation, is irrational in its character, and . . . amounts to a scandalous . . . libel on the beneficent designs of Providence” (1:22:169–70). Interestingly, the prominent Whig political economist J. R.