

# DOCTOR OF LOVE

James Graham and  
His Celestial Bed

LYDIA SYSON



ALMA BOOKS

## Contents

Doctor of Love	1
<i>Prologue</i>	3
<i>The Beginning</i>	9
<i>The Spark</i>	35
<i>The Treatment</i>	69
<i>The Speculators</i>	105
<i>The Gestation</i>	129
<i>The Bed</i>	161
<i>The Lecture</i>	195
<i>The End</i>	233
<i>Afterword</i>	263
Notes	265
Brief Bibliography	309
Acknowledgements	315
Index	317
List of Illustrations	331

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DOCTOR OF LOVE

## *Prologue*

In 1780, James Graham was turning away carriages from his door on a nightly basis. He had London eating out of his hand, and images of the Doctor were everywhere – on stage, in the print shops, in the newspapers and on the streets. A Swedish visitor who sought him out said he kept the finest carriage and horses in the whole city, and seemed to see into the heart of every Englishman. “I am... not only a doctor of medicine, but a physician of the soul,” claimed Graham. At the Temple of Health, overlooking the Thames, he ran the most exciting show in town. He had apparently succeeded in translating sexual knowledge into polite and rational entertainment.

Walking into the Temple was like entering the inner chambers of some enchanter’s palace. Exotic perfumes and distant music seemed to seep as if without source into every room, and rainbow shards of light shining from one mysterious machine’s prismatic pillar fractured in the spiralling glass columns of another. Glittering festoons of artificial flowers were mirrored in every shiny surface. A profusion of candles burning in silver-and-rhinestone candelabra added the scent of beeswax to an already heady atmosphere, designed to appeal to every sense. Meanwhile Graham had had a field day with a newly published guide to symbolism. Every crowing china cock, every rabbit, every mule, every fake stained-glass window pane radiated allegorical significance. Here was a bust of Hippocrates, here Cupid, here Galen – and there a salamander, a phoenix or a sphinx.

The vast and unmistakably phallic electrical conductor in the first room needed no interpretation though. This metal cylinder, eleven feet long and four in circumference, was suggestively described as ending in two semi-globes. It rested on six-foot-high pillars of intricately cut glass, reflecting and refracting all the coloured lamps and candles to dazzling effect. On metal shelves running its length glowed an enticing selection of the tools of Graham’s trade: jars, vessels and phials filled with mysterious healing essences, supposedly impregnated with the electrical, magnetic and aerial forces which the Doctor claimed at his command.

On the other side of the room a six-foot sparkling golden dragon appeared to fly, its wings outstretched, eyes ablaze and forked

crimson tongue extended to receive the “lambent elementary fire”. The electrical charge passed, visibly and loudly crackling, along the creature’s scaly body and out through its tail. Connecting with the huge conductor, the charge continued along polished brass rods entwined with silken cords to activate a ten-foot-high throne, where crimson-flowered damask cushions could seat six or eight people for simultaneous treatment. Another five rooms displayed an equally eye-catching cornucopia. Everywhere, glass structures glittered and spiralled. The most stylish new techniques of the decorative arts did not just lend glamour to the latest inventions of natural philosophy. They were fundamental to the way Graham’s Temple was constructed and construed. In the holy of holies, the Grand Apollo Chamber, the Doctor lectured an enthralled public.

Electricity was the most thrilling and visible of the scientific developments of the Enlightenment, “an Entertainment for Angels, rather than for Men”. In a candlelit world, the drama of experiments involving showers of phosphorescent fire, liquids set alight and luminous bodies could hardly fail to bewitch the public. Extraordinary looking machinery generated static electrical “fire” by applying friction to hand-cranked spinning glass globes, cylinders and plates. The long tubes wielded by popular electrical demonstrators were uncannily like conjuror’s wands, reinforcing the magical and miraculous air of this exciting new form of pyrotechnics. There was no escaping what else they resembled. Satirists and writers of erotica were quick to make the obvious associations, capitalizing delightedly on the newly familiar terminology of electrical “fluids” and “friction”, the principles of attraction and repulsion, and the erections of human fibres.

James Graham took this several steps further, and he was perfectly serious. He firmly believed that “the venereal act itself, at all times, and under every circumstances, is in fact, no other than an electrical operation.” It seemed to make every sense. Those “heart-piercing and irresistible glances” which shoot at critical times from soul to soul were “no other than electrical strokes or emanations!” Just as electricians had to charge up their capacitors, so the “animal electrical tube or cylinder” needed to be excited “for the accumulation, or mustering up of the balmy fire of life!... Then follows the discharging, or passage of that balmy, luminous, active principle, from the *plus* male to the *minus* female. These are all mere, plain, demonstrable, electrical processes.” In Graham’s mind and in the lectures with which he shocked and entranced an aristocratic

Georgian public, the fleshy-looking leather pad against which the glass of electrical machines rubbed as it rotated became a grotesque image of a woman’s genitals. Both women and machinery were said to operate most effectively when pristine. Today cosmetic surgeons offer to rejuvenate women’s sexual organs on the operating table. In the 1780s Graham promised that a combination of scrupulous hygiene and judiciously applied electrical “fire” could do much the same thing.

Putting the latest principles of natural philosophy to practical use in the act of procreation, the Doctor came up with his most extraordinary invention, the “medico, magnetico, musico, electrical” Celestial Bed. He opened a second Temple to house this astonishing piece of furniture-cum-medical apparatus. Marriages and families would no longer be ruined by infidelity and infertility. Britain could be populated with a race of superhumans, of the highest physical and mental calibre. In the Bed’s final and most extraordinary incarnation, electricity, magnetism, mechanical musicians, fragrant airs, fresh flowers, seductive mirrors and miniature automata all came together to deliver sexual pleasures that were said to be sublime. By appointment only, couples could cough up £50 a night – a huge sum – to enjoy its prolonged delights. Officially, they had to be married, but discretion was assured.

Nobles, gentry and courtesans turned up in their hundreds to hear Graham lecture on the bed’s wonders, even before it was unveiled. Alongside electricity and magnetism, Graham also harnessed the fashionable new discoveries of chemistry to his cause – mind-altering substances like ether and nitrous oxide. He pioneered music therapy, incorporating intriguing new instruments into his equipment and conjugal music-making into his love-making advice.

The adulterous, the barren and the prurient arrived in their silks and masks to enjoy the illuminated glories of Graham’s regal decor, his glitzy gold-and-glass take on the most up-to-date scientific research. They left with discreet booklets that promised to put the sexual sublime into the lives of every married couple, even without the benefits of the famous bed.

Against the most stylish and splendid backdrop imaginable, the Doctor – tall, handsome and utterly charming – railed against the degeneracy of luxury. Later he ventriloquized sexual equality through Vestina, his Goddess of Health, and was equally outspoken in his objections to slavery in the Atlantic triangle and Britain’s death-dealing part in the American War of Independence. Amidst scenes

of decorative excess and between evocations of political liberty, he preached moderation and regulation: early hours, plenty of exercise, a vegetarian diet, open air and above all genital hygiene. Nothing was more important than cold-water washing.

It was all very confusing. While Graham came up with legal reforms for the horrors of prostitution, prostitutes themselves adopted his rejuvenating techniques with huge success. Miss Harriet Jones of Wapping, who could with lips and tongue “make a man of sixty young”, and boasted a “beautiful *black fringe*” bordering her “*Venetian Mount*”, was reported by a guidebook to pursue “the *Grahamitic* method”. Whether this was “from a practical knowledge of its increase of pleasure, from motives of cleanliness, or as a certain preventative we will not pretend to say; but we well know it makes her the more desirable bed-fellow, and after every *stroke* gives fresh *tone and vigour* to the lately *distended parts*”.

Graham’s life reflected the rainbow colours of his times like one of the prismatic columns that supported his healing electro-magnetic structures. At the height of his success he trod a line every bit as precarious as that of the high-wire walkers who competed for audiences at Astley’s amphitheatre over at Westminster Bridge, perilously poised between the sublime and the ridiculous. He used to argue that, like the wet nose of a dog, “a cold, glowing, full, liquid balmy firmness... of the genital parts” showed a state of “perfect health and strength!” Just as he touted the conditions of the genitals as “the true pulse, the infallible barometer” of a person’s health, so the figure of Graham himself, endlessly rendered in caricature with phallic objects (whether the scroll of his famous lecture, or the prime conductor of his electrical apparatus), came to stand for the moral state of health of the nation. He quickly became an invaluable malleable image for satirists wanting to consider the ailments of the state. Gambling, riots, fashion, luxury, social climbing and public credulity were all anatomized through the figure of the electric empiric.

James Graham has long been regarded as one of the Enlightenment’s best sideshows, good for a snigger, or an entertaining footnote to the stories of history’s main players. As a one-off eccentric, he spawned no movement, gave rise to no lasting neologism, inspired no posthumous acolytes. But he was as typical of the eighteenth century as any of the great scientists, writers and philosophers. This, after all, was a period stuffed with little men trying to make it big in a vibrantly commercial world. Some, like Graham, briefly succeeded; others sank with no trace. In many ways the Doctor was

an entrepreneur par excellence. He took up all the most exciting new developments of his era and remade them in compellingly original forms. But he was not a very realistic businessman.

Colourful though Graham’s story was, it was also a tragic one. Even at the moment of his greatest success, the Doctor inevitably attracted notoriety. While half of London flocked in awe to his door, the other half denounced him as the King of Quacks, an impudent charlatan whose magnetic charms drew money from the pockets of gullible fools. It was a label that stuck, for two centuries and more, and one that has allowed history to misjudge him. For although Graham was a man who sometimes made himself ridiculous, he lived life with the best intentions. His spirited and humane take on the world’s problems can hardly fail to strike a chord today. He was utterly convinced that he had been put on earth to improve the lot of humankind. But as his ever wilder ambitions exceeded his ability to pay for them, he found himself increasingly compromised and misunderstood.

In newspapers, handbills, health manuals and pamphlets, he poured “forth unreservedly his whole Soul!” His life was one self-consciously dramatized in his own publicity; he told his own tale, piecemeal, through florid advertisements and promotional literature that took hyperbole to new heights. In contrast to his prolific output in print, he left few manuscripts. What letters survive were written in a professional context to patients or patrons, and Graham tended to keep his family out of the limelight he loved. This lack of intimate evidence is inevitably a problem for a biographer. I have worried at times about being duped by my subject, fretted that I have simply fallen for the public persona of a contradictory individual. But what if Graham had written a full-length memoir, left a private journal, or preserved more personal correspondence? Would such documents be any more authentic, and should a biographer’s wariness about them be any less acute? Is an individual necessarily any less self-deluding in manuscript than in print, in autobiography than in advertising? Print was where Graham made himself, and where he was destroyed, and he was born at a time when its possibilities were still being revealed. Brash, commercial and self-seeking, yet touchingly heartfelt, the Doctor’s published remains are rich and colourful. They are the testimonials of an exceptional individual, a man entirely of his time. Here then, is a story in small ads.

# 1

## *The Beginning*

“...though all the portals open stand  
Of Health’s own temple at her Graham’s command  
And the great high-priest baffling Death and Sin  
Earth each immortal idiot to the chin,  
Ask of these wretched beings worse than dead  
If on the couch celestial gold can shed  
The coarser blessings of a Peasant’s bed.”

– Wordsworth, *Imitation of Juvenal*

“From my earliest infancy, I loved  
the profession of medicine...”

At Edinburgh, an operation was a performance. It had been the same in Leiden, where most of the Scottish medical school’s founders had learnt their trade. The surgeons usually scheduled their operations for Sunday afternoons – so as not to clash with lectures and church services – and advertised tickets beforehand on notices in the hospital’s consulting room, alerting students and apprentices to the forthcoming drama. Like clinical lectures, autopsies and even religious services, surgery took place in the amphitheatre. It was the heart of Edinburgh’s new Royal Infirmary, architecturally and philosophically, an airy room built over the hospital’s generous central staircase, designed to allow plenty of space for patient-bearing sedan chairs. An elegant coved roof and glassed cupola let the light pour in from above, while steeply raked benches rising up on three sides of the theatre gave a fine view of the proceedings for several hundred observers. Others hung from galleries above.

Before scalpels were drawn, the surgeon would review the reasons for the operation under scrutiny, and discuss formally how it should be performed. What followed required strength of purpose for everyone present. “Und[a]unted firmness of resolution...” was essential for the operating surgeon, according to an eighteenth-century handbook on hospitals. He must be “staggered neither by tears, sighs, or groans, the sight of blood, or even death’s pale image”. Meanwhile the patient endured “unspeakable pain and torture”. As the blood ran off the runnels of the operating table’s oilskin cover, the surgeon, dressed in a frock coat stiff with the pus and human debris of previous operations, would kick a box of sawdust underneath to soak up the overflow. The fortifications surgeons needed for such scenes was not always exclusively mental: “I have seen several primed with a good dram of brandy just before they went to the theatre...” one Chair of Medicine revealed towards the end of the century, adding with heavy sarcasm, “I must do them justice to say that they drank their brandy most scientifically out of a cupping glass.”

It wasn't encouraged, but the audience often passed audible judgement on the skill of different surgeons as though they were at a playhouse. One year the students' vocal criticism of one nervous operator attempting a delicate eye procedure with trembling hands provoked a serious reprimand. Others were occasionally expelled from the premises for clapping or hissing as an operation took place. From time to time, some left of their own accord, unable to stomach particularly gruesome scenes. An American student, James Rush, wrote home about a breast-cancer operation he had witnessed: "The mamma was taken off very expeditiously indeed, and I was about to give credit to the hand of the operator – But just as the ligatures had all been applied, and the dressings were about to be put on – It was discovered that the diseased part had not been entirely extracted... the barbarous handling and even *punching* of wounded flesh... which followed – was too shocking to look at."

The Royal Infirmary, where all this took place, had risen stone by stone on the far side of Edinburgh's Cowgate valley through James Graham's infancy, "reared by the hand of charity". It had been an exemplary municipal enterprise. The new landmark was a living, humming manifestation of the great age of improvement just dawning in Scotland. In the early 1750s, Edinburgh was a city consciously on the cusp of change. Scotland as a whole had only recently recovered from the economic devastation wrought by the 1707 Act of Union, destructive of the country's independent parliament and its self-confidence alike. Now Edinburgh's boom years were beginning. Politeness and civic virtues reigned as the economy surged.

Born in the middle of a cold wet June in 1745, Graham came into the world at the perfect moment to take advantage of Edinburgh's astonishing metamorphosis. The Grahams were a family of squarely middling means, that ever-growing band. His father, an "honest laborious" saddler, was a respectable burgess, his maternal grandfather a lawyer. The future Dr Graham may have had none of the advantages of a medical family, with its invaluable inheritance of knowledge, practice and professional networks, but neither was he brought up in rags and squalor.

At least, no more squalor than any other inhabitant of Edinburgh had to endure, rich or poor. Stinking "Auld Reekie", as Edinburgh is still affectionately known, then thoroughly deserved its nickname. The Old Town, with its memorably vile "morning smells", constituted the entire city at this point. The elegant New Town – which half a century later would earn the city an elegant new sobriquet, "the

Athens of the North" – was still unimagined. Most people lived in dark, cramped, multi-storey tenements: impossibly narrow buildings that clung defensively to the steep sides of the castle-topped, volcanic crag, or gripped the sweeping tail long ago left behind by retreating glaciers, now the backbone of the Royal Mile. Each floor housed several families, from all walks of life. William and Jean Graham moved from the outskirts of Edinburgh into its centre in 1751. Their new home in Veitch's Land was off the West Bow, leading up from the Grassmarket, and the tenement was shared with two coppersmiths, some merchants, an ale-seller, a glover and a blacksmith. It was near enough Cowgate – a thoroughfare with a less salubrious ring to it – to have been elided with it repeatedly in later accounts of James Graham's life.

The Grahams were not the kind of family who left much behind in the way of documentary evidence. When it comes to reconstructing the details of James Graham's childhood and early life, there is little more substantial on which to rely than the births, marriages and deaths recorded, with luck, in Old Parish Records. His earliest biographer was another Edinburgh resident called Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, whose brief handwritten account eventually found its way, undated, into the National Library of Scotland, tucked into a (probably pirated) edition of Graham's *Eccentric Lecture*. But Sharpe, an expert on matters antiquarian, a ballad-collector and a friend of Walter Scott, was barely a teenager when Graham died, so he must have collected his evidence from others. A respected scholar, he was also a man known for his taste for historical gossip and marital scandal. Though his version of Graham's life seems largely accurate, it's not completely reliable. The same is certainly true of a more detailed biographical sketch written in the late 1830s to accompany John Kay's 1786 portrait of Graham in a collection known as *Kay's Edinburgh Portraits*. It was probably written by a Scottish journalist called James Paterson, sixty years Graham's junior, who could never have known him personally. Errors in both these accounts have been unknowingly replicated in later writings about Graham.

From the *Edinburgh Portraits* sketch we learn that William and Jean Graham were "old-fashioned Presbyterian Whigs of the strictest kind". James grew up singing psalms every Sunday at Greyfriars church. In old age his parents would come to enjoy every attention from their most celebrated son, taking morning airings in his smart carriage, attended by gorgeously liveried servants and generally surrounded by the kind of "pomp and vanities" which Graham often

found hard to resist. Mrs Graham was said to have helped out at the Temple in later life, selling medicines and pamphlets, but during James' childhood she must have been immured in domesticity, as one confinement followed another. She produced nine children in all, five of whom survived to adulthood. The eldest, Grizell, had been born in Falkirk, Stirlingshire, where William Graham had established himself as a saddler before his marriage. Elspeth, James, Robert, and Jean were all born at Crosscausey, then just outside the city. After the family's move to the heart of Edinburgh, twins were born, Rachell and Margaret, who survived at least a few weeks to be baptized on 13th January. They were followed by Ann, who, like Grizell and Elspeth, definitely grew up and married. But just a week before Ann's birth in October 1753, a child of a William Graham was buried in their parish. This was probably six-year-old Robert, since James later described his youngest sibling William as his "only" brother. The baby of the family, born in 1755 and named after his father, was said to be so like James that the brothers were sometimes mistaken for one another, despite the ten years between them. Like James, William began his medical training in his mid-teens. By his early twenties, he had inadvertently propelled his older brother into national fame.

The Graham family lived a stone's throw from the public execution site described by one of James Graham's future patients, Walter Scott:

The fatal day was announced to the public, by the appearance of a huge black gallows-tree towards the eastern end of the Grass-market. This ill-omened apparition was of great height, with a scaffold surrounding it, and a double ladder placed against it, for the ascent of the unhappy criminal and the executioner. As this apparatus was always arranged before dawn, it seemed as if the gallows had grown out of the earth in the course of one night, like the production of some foul demon; and I well remember the fright with which the schoolboys, when I was one of their number, used to regard these ominous signs of deadly preparation.

Medical students took a different view of events, often their first introduction to people they would come to know at closer quarters. "Saw two men hanged for murder," one student, Syllas Neville, confided laconically to his journal in 1773. "I should not have gone if it had not been reported that they intended making some resistance.

Was afterwards at the College when the bodies were received for dissection. They bled on the jugular being opened but not at the arm." Corpses for anatomy classes were hard to come by, and tended to become familiar through long use.

The saddler's son embarked on his professional training probably only after a decent and inexpensive schooling at the nearby Royal High School, which was favoured by virtually every respectable Edinburgh citizen. There he would have had at least six years' education in Latin language and literature, instruction in Roman antiquities, comparative ancient and modern geography, and learnt a smattering of Greek. He would also have spent much of his boyhood on the far side of the high stone walls which surrounded the new Infirmary next door to the school, expressly built to repel invaders from the school yard.

Graham grew up witnessing a steady influx of aspiring medics arriving each autumn for the beginning of the Winter Session. They were a conspicuous city presence, swarming between lectures, and trooping in and out of the Infirmary. The students packed out Edinburgh's boarding houses and rented rooms, the richer young men frequenting the oyster bars and whorehouses, the poorer ones confined to an expensive daily grind of lectures and note-taking that left little leisure for debauchery. Edinburgh was still the only place in Britain to combine a university education with clinical instruction in medicine. (The kind of training available at London hospitals was usually seen as a practical addition to an academic degree rather than its substitute.) Graduates could walk away with the title of MD in just three years. Oxford and Cambridge medical degrees were no more prestigious but still demanded a seven- or eight-year investment, and were only open to Church of England men. Not surprisingly then, Edinburgh drew all sorts.

In the autumn of 1761, sixteen-year-old Graham joined a gathering of embryonic doctors to sign the Matriculation Album in the University Library. He must have stood out even then, if only thanks to his impressive height and undeniable good looks. But he was also clearly already blessed with that supreme self-confidence which would propel him through life in years to come. Sharpe noted retrospectively that his "impudence" at this age was said to have been "very conspicuous". This did not simply mean that he was impertinent, but rather suggests that Graham was marked by a kind of chutzpah, that brand of charming audacity that can slide so easily between self-assurance and arrogance.

Most newcomers were impressed by the cosmopolitan crowd of young men who assembled at the beginning of each academic year. A Danish physician who spent some months in the city as a student in 1765 remembered mixing with Americans and West Indians, Portuguese and Italians, Frenchmen and Englishmen, Irishmen and Dutchmen, Germans and Swiss, Russians and Danes. Edinburgh was internationally famous for its medical education: it “already rivals, if not surpasses, that of every other school of Physic in Europe”, wrote a young American contemporary, one of the university’s many Philadelphian graduates.

One self-satisfied English undergraduate, Walter Jones, divided the heterogeneous mass that assembled in the library on his first day into three “ranks or orders”:

1st the Fine Gentlemen, or those who give no application to study, but spend the Revenues of Gentlemen of Independent Fortunes. 2ly. The Gentlemen, or Students of Medicine strictly speaking, these live genteely and at the same time apply themselves to study. 3ly. The vulgar, or those who, if they are not indolent, are entirely devoid of everything polite and agreeable. I believe you will not doubt for a moment with which of these orders I ought to associate.

Graham was not in a position to worry too much about the social status of his fellow students, nor did he need to write home to describe his new life. One new friend, Thomas Arnold, clearly relished the chance to broaden his horizons: “I need not tell you that Edinburgh is the place to my wish...” he enthused, when he arrived from the Midlands in 1762. Arnold had previously been apprenticed to Richard Pulteney, a non-conformist apothecary and botanist, and he went on to become a respected expert in lunacy, running an asylum in his home town of Leicester. In July 1766 Arnold married James’s older sister Elspeth in Edinburgh. By this time she had refined her name to Elizabeth and he had added MD to his own. “A College Life is my Element,” he wrote to his former master just after his first Christmas in the city. “I think it the most agreeable Life upon Earth: and at present my only Fear is lest it should be too short. And how can it be otherwise. When one is continually meeting with something new; daily, nay, hourly, Increasing our Stock of Ideas; and enlarging the petty Circle which had before Circumscribed our Knowledge; one cannot but receive Abundance of Pleasure, and wish that Pleasure may be long continued.”

Arnold’s friend Timothy Bentley had been another Pulteney apprentice, and he was just as taken with Edinburgh. “I am well happy and shall remember the Seat of the Muses with pleasure as long as I live,” Bentley assured Pulteney, subsequently confessing, “I observe you allow me to think of the Girls now and then ... and tho’ I keep them pretty much out of my sights I can’t always keep them out of my mind.”

Despite Graham’s later claims to have been “regularly bred to Physic and Surgery”, there was really no such thing as a typical Edinburgh student. Even aside from the divisions of social class, age and gentility which some young men were so quick to notice, there were quite a number of different routes to a medical education at the university. The gentlemen physicians could take their time over graduation, enjoying the benefits of membership of the official Medical Society as well as opportunities to hobnob with their professors after class. Many seemed to spend as much time in taverns, brothels and theatres as they did in lectures. For those who could afford it, the pleasures of attending the Assembly Hall and enjoying concerts and plays were not just distractions from study, but an indispensable part of a gentleman physician’s grooming. He needed the skills to present himself as the social equal of his future patients as surely as he needed a knowledge of anatomy. Samuel Johnson had recently coined the word “clubbable”: this was only one of the advantages for Syllas Neville and his friends of membership of the Beggar’s Benison, an Edinburgh gentlemen’s sex club which rejoiced in the motto: “May Prick nor Purse ne’er fail you”.

In contrast to this, an apprentice’s education was firmly directed by his surgeon or apothecary master. It was invariably dominated by shop-floor drudgery – sweeping up, rolling pills, washing bandages, making up bills and running errands. Note-taking in class must have come as light relief. An apprentice lived with his master’s family, and was expected to avoid his daughters. According to Sharpe, Graham was apprenticed to a chemist and apothecary at this point. But no evidence remains of any such indenture, which, since it was taxable, should have been recorded officially at the time.

It’s more likely that Graham was one of a third group of students, the largest and most elusive type, and a mixed bag in themselves. Until recently, very little has been known about the “occasional auditors” identified by an early nineteenth-century Royal Commission. What united these students was the fact that they attended classes when the opportunity arose, and left with no form of certification, sometimes