ATHLOS

Six-Feet Club, Edinburgh.

This extended note has been prepared to accompany the *Athlos* introduction to George Roland's, *An Introductory Course of Modern Gymnastic Exercises*, 1832. Little has previously been written about the Six-Feet Club and this note has been prepared to provide a background to its creation, and to explain its significance. Peter Radford/2015

The seed of the idea was sown in 1822 when George IV visited Edinburgh, the first reigning monarch to do so since 1650. It was an event rich in ceremonial pageantry and, although it is tempting to also say 'tradition', it has to be acknowledged that much of that tradition was a self-conscious re-invention of the past; and sometimes an invented mock-medievalism, orchestrated by Sir Walter Scott. Part (a very minor part) of the ceremonials was the creation of a local guard of honour for the King. David Birrell described his part in it.

> A Celtic Club was got up in Edinburgh to furnish an honorary guard . . . I joined the club, and standing a few odd inches above the average height, I was generally in a conspicuous place in their evolutions. When I was on guard at Holyrood, Sir Walter, who took an interest in the organisation of the club, wanted to present me to his Majesty, and pressed me very urgently to allow him to do so, but my modesty would not allow me to go, although I felt much gratified by Sir Walter's kindness.[1]

The episode so stuck in Birrell's mind, and stayed so vivid, that he was able to describe it some fifty years later; on reflection he recognised that being tall made him particularly suited to being in the King's body-guard, and so he should have seized the opportunity to be introduced to King, and not declined it. Being tall was an advantage, and Sir Walter Scott, who was also tall, had taken advantage of it; and he and Birrell had both stood out above the others on the King's visit. Birrell and Walter Scott were friends and kept in touch, and we can imagine them talking about the advantages that tall men naturally had. The idea was born. Birrell, in his own words, had "always in his youth been rather fond of gymnastics"[2]; what would a whole club of tall, athletic men be able to achieve? And how impressive a guard of honour would they be! Nothing like it had ever been done before, but they would certainly be noticeable and impressive.

It cannot have been an easy matter to convert such an idea into a functioning club. A club needs a purpose to which other people will subscribe, it needs rules that others will accept, it needs a programme, a meeting-place, and it needs funds. By 1825, apparently, enough tall men in and around Edinburgh had agreed that such a club should be formed[3] and on 1st February 1826 it formally came into being.[4] It was to be a club created "for the express encouragement, practice, and promotion of all national and manly games"[5] and David Birrell, who proved to be a natural organiser, was its Captain.[6] It was a fitness-club for tall men and met three times a week in Edinburgh: and it was to have two outdoor General Meetings a year, six months apart, one in May and the other in November. The first one we have any details of was held in May 1827, and comprised of three events – Quoits, Putting the Stone, and the Steeple Chase. Was this Scotland's first amateur athletics meeting? There had, of course, been many running matches and throwing competitions before, either individually or subsumed into Highland Games, where the greater part of the event was taken up with piping, dancing and other Highland, cultural pursuits. But this was a meeting devoted *entirely* to throwing and running events, and was a significant departure from anything in the past; and it drew a good crowd too with several notable and influential spectators. Putting the Stone was a Scottish sport, but although Quoits is often thought of as an English game, Thom (1813) lists it among Captain Barclay's regular activities.[7] Thom described it as "analogous to the English game",[8] but the Scottish version was slightly different and, at the *Six-Feet Club's* May meeting the following year, they used quoits described as "Lanarkshire Quoits

weighing 10lbs", significantly heavier than those used in England. Thom also wrote that it was "what the ancients termed the Discus"; so Quoits was a Scottish sport at the time, albeit a minority one.[9] No details are given of the length of the "steeple chase", but the following year it was "about a mile" and won in "3 minutes and a half", so rather less than a mile!

Reports of the Six-Feet Club's General Meetings give their location only as *The Hunter's Tryst*, a tavern on the Oxgangs Road. It is still there. There must have been a field alongside it in which the General Meetings took place, but it is, strangely, never mentioned. That field has long since disappeared, however, and today may be underneath the neighbouring Morrison's Supermarket.

The General Meeting of the *Six-Feet Club* did not have any jumping events but, just four months later, the "First Meeting of the St Ronan's Border Club" was held at Innerleithen, and that also was entirely devoted to athletic events – hop step and leap [Triple Jump], running leap [Long Jump], putting the stone (16lbs) [Shot Put], putting the stone (20lbs), throwing the hammer (13lbs) [Hammer Throw - almost], wrestling, and four running races (two longer than the others), upright running leap [High Jump]. So there was a full programme of running, jumping and throwing events (plus wrestling).[10] Innerleithen is less than 30 miles south of Edinburgh.

If May 1827 saw the first event in Scotland solely devoted to amateurs running and throwing, September 1827 saw jumping events added to the programme; an historian is entitle to ask, why did this occur then, and why there? Birrell's awareness of his own exceptional height, and his decision to form a club of tall men, might provide a starting point but it does not explain why the club developed the way it did; but the men around Birrell, and the ideas circulating at the time, do help us understand it a little better.

Captain Clias and Gymnastics

Even as Birrell was contemplating a club for tall men, a club of physically big and active men, fit to be an imposing guard of honour, the entire landscape of thought about exercise and fitness began to change. Looking back, it is possible to see that it had already started in 1800 with the translation into English of Christian Salzmann's book, *Gymnastics for Youth*,[11] but at the time it seemed to be only applicable to children in school. It did, however, bring the ideas of Basedow, GutsMuths, and others, into Britain.

In 1823 two books appeared virtually simultaneously in Britain: one was, *An Elementary Course of Gymnastic Exercises*, by Capt. Peter Clias, and the other was *Instructions in all Kinds of Gymnastic Exercises, as Taught and Practised in the Gymnastic Institutions of Germany*, by A Military Officer. Both were reviewed in the same issue of *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal* in December 1823. Capt. Clias's book cost seven shillings and six pence and sold out quickly, and had to be reprinted; and by 1825 had had to be reprinted three times.

Captain Clias arrived in Britain in 1822[12] to teach a form of massage, which was not successful, but while he was in London he was fortunate to meet Henry Sass, a painter, who ran the most successful art school in London and which prepared its students for entry to the Royal Academy. Henry Sass invited Capt. Clias to a breakfast meeting with "a large body of gentlemen" where Clias demonstrated to them his skills on a horizontal bar, reportedly the first to be seen in London. "All present were delighted," and Sir Thomas Lawrence (President of the Royal Academy) arranged for him to be voted 50 guineas (£52.5) – which would have had a purchasing power of nearly £4,000 in 2015. This led to his introduction to Col. Cooke of the Coldstream Guards (later, Sir Henry Frederick Cooke) and through him to the Duke of York, to whom Cooke was also aide-de-camp. This led to his invitation, in August 1823, to visit the Royal Military College, Sandhurst where he put the students through a programme of his gymnastic exercises in front of "a numerous and fashionable" gathering. It was also a sort of book-promotion exercise, for his book was in a late stage of preparation then. Clias awarded his first prize of a gold snuff box to Gentleman Cadet Curtis for his all-round ability, 2nd prize of a gold medal to Gentleman Cadet Innes, for wrestling

and climbing the straight pole, and 3rd prize of 5 Guineas to Gentleman Cadet Fyers for being the best runner.[13]

Henry Sass also introduced Clias to Sir Anthony Carlisle, who was surgeon at Westminster Hospital, Fellow of the Royal Society and Professor of Anatomy of the Society, and Surgeon Extraordinary to George IV, and Clias "exhibited" at some of Carlisle's lectures. Through Henry Sass, Capt Clias had created a portfolio of contacts in London that was second to none.

By February 1824 Clias had opened his Central School in St James's in the heart of fashionable London, and styled himself "Professor of Gymnastic Exercises in the Royal Military Institutions of Chelsea, Sandhurst, Greenwich, &c, &c.,"[14] and the acceptance of his programme as part of military training was said to be at the instigation of the Duke of Wellington himself,[15] and he was planning to take his system into schools, with Charterhouse as his first client. The *London Physical and Medical Journal* had enthusiastically endorsed him and his work, and their enthusiasm was given greater profile by being reprinted in the newspapers –

> Captain CLIAS has been long known on the Continent as the active promoter of all those exercises tending to develop and increase the physical powers of man. The regular and systematic method taught by Captain CLIAS is not only well calculated to give the body its full degree of strength and activity, but by the mode of teaching, precludes almost the possibility of the occurrence of any accident. Finally we beg leave to add, that the Commandants of the R.M.A. Chelsea, and R.N.A. Greenwich, have made the important remark, that the boys of those Institutions, who have been regularly exercised, improve not only their strength, figure, gait, and activity, but that also their growth is very remarkable. The Physicians of these Institutions have also verified that the Boys, who have attended the Gymnastic Lessons, have had during the last two winters neither coughs nor chilblains.[16]

In August 1824 Capt. Clias received official recognition by being appointed Superintendent of Gymnastic Exercises at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, with the rank and pay of a captain of the British Army.[17] Accepted by the medical profession and by the military and educational establishments, by 1826 he was ready for further expansion, this time into high society, when he aimed his system specifically at women. He hired the Argyll Rooms in London and invited a large number of "the upper class of society". *The Morning Post* reported that they could remember no previous occasion "upon which we have seen the rooms distinguished by such an immense assemblage of persons of fashion and distinction"; even so, hundreds were turned away because there was no more room

He delivered an introductory address, and then handed over to Miss Marian Mason whom he had trained to be an instructress. He performed his "manly" exercises and Miss Mason performed what Clias described as *calisthenics* to music, with the grace, "precision, elegance, and delicacy" appropriate for the "softer sex". Miss Mason had a dance background, her father had been Dancing Master to the Royal Family,[18] and her brother was a dance teacher in Exeter,[19] so she knew how to put on a show and entrance her audience. "We cannot doubt, for a moment, of the beneficial influence of the Calisthenic Exercises upon the health, strength, and grace of the rising generation of our fair countrywomen, wherever their practice may be adopted," wrote *The Morning Post*, and they congratulated Miss Mason "on the eclat of her first essay", and cordially wished her success.[20]

In just three years, Captain Clias had had extraordinary success with his gymnastics book and his gymnastic/calisthenics classes. Gymnastics was sweeping the country, and its fame was sending people back to the earlier work of Salzmann, and gymnastics was being seen as a cure for many educational and social ills – better, for example, than allowing boys to fight as they did at Eton.[21] Gymnastics was promoted as a better educational and social tool than anything previously seen in Britain, and those who brought the news of it were guaranteed a big audience. In May 1825, Professor Voelker opened an open air Gymnasium occupying an acre site near Regents Park in London,[22] J.A. Beaujeu opened a gymnasium in Dublin[23] and there was talk of him opening one in Liverpool;[24] the teachers were all Europeans, and their ideas all came from elsewhere - it was like

a foreign invasion and the locals had to join the movement or be left behind. In Birmingham, Mr Cresshull had to appoint an Assistant Teacher of Gymnastics and calisthenics, who had been a student of Capt Clias,[25] to his Gymnasium and, in Edinburgh, George Roland, who had run fencing rooms and fencing classes for years, had to follow the fashion and teach Capt Clias's Gymnastics as well.

It was inevitable that a reaction would come one day. It came in August 1826 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*[26] from the pen of its editor Christopher North, in the form of a 30,000-word review of the 4th edition of Capt Clias's book (which included 'a new and complete treatise on the art of swimming'). It is a brilliant example of Christopher North's style, conversational, witty, and rambling; he wrote to entertain his readers and he doesn't fail here. He writes with warmth and courtesy as if Captain Clias was in the room with him and he wanted the smile on Clias's face to stay there; nevertheless, his irritation with Clias is barely beneath the surface.

We need to know what all his readers knew, that Christopher North was John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. Christopher North wasn't a nom de plume designed to mask his true identity, everybody knew that Christopher North and Professor Wilson were one and the same person, and Prof Wilson and Christopher North were the first to tell them so. It was a sort of game that he played with himself and which he invited his readers to join in. It allowed him to have a double persona – to be two people at once – and for each, on occasions, to learn something from, or to poke fun at, the other. He wrote rapidly, fluently, and flamboyantly, just as he spoke, which is why he was such a popular lecturer; students rushed to get the best seats or crammed the aisles just to hear him talk on anything. On sport however, he was an expert.

It is difficult to know two centuries on, what to call him. Technically we should call him John Wilson, but publically he was hardly ever known as such in his own day, except in his youth; but his youth was important to his story. Prof Wilson sounds too formal now, and to describe his writing as being by Prof Wilson, when they have been described for nearly 200 years as being by Christopher North, seems odd too. But we will meet him in this narrative in all his guises and so, to capture the spirit of the age, I will refer to him variously as Christopher North, John Wilson or Prof Wilson, and ask the reader to remember that they are all the same man.

He was born in Paisley, Scotland, in 1785 and went to Glasgow University at the age of twelve where he was good at sport as well as his studies. Even as a boy he was known as "the king of all sports".[27] In 1803 he went to Magdalen College, Oxford, through to 1807, without, it was said, a vacation. During these years he became an exceptional scholar and an exceptional athlete. He was a long jumper of rare ability and was proud of jumping 23ft (7.01m) 'measured to a nicety'[28] and 'on level ground or nearly so – in presence of a thousand spectators' in 1806.[29] This would have been done, grass to grass, i.e. no sand landing area! He was a natural athlete who also boxed, ran, and took part in a multitude of sports, all to a high level; he was also an exceptional sailor. He knew the athletes of the time well, having travelled all over England and Scotland to the meetings where they took part, and watching them closely. He was one of those athletes who was aware of himself and what he did, and was observant of those around him. He watched how people stood or sat, watched the balance of a runner, and the range of individual styles and techniques. By training he watched the world around him, birds, trees, tides, people, and developed classifications and theories with the mind of a scientist (he was described as a 'naturalist'[30]), but was able to express his ideas with style and panache, and wrote verse and prose along with the best. As a young man he knew Wordsworth and Coleridge well[31] and he built a fine house for himself at Elleray on the banks of Lake Windermere in the Lake District; and it may have been at the Grasmere Sports that he jumped his 23ft. His knowledge of sport and his feel for it, coupled with his undoubted skill, made him the go-to authority. Thomas de Quincey, who knew him for over twenty years, wrote of him that "no man was a better judge upon questions of bodily prowess", and went on to describe his knowledge of sporting events, his skill in boxing, and his power as a hitter in particular, and his skill in running and jumping, and dancing; he was "the Pelidas of his time", he wrote. He wrote of him around the year 1805 walking 50 miles to a Prize Fight at Moulsey Hurst where he gave a demonstration of his jumping to the members of the Fancy gathered there, despite having not slept and the weariness in his legs from the walk.

They wanted to set up a wager for him to jump against Bill Richmond, a well-known black boxer, cricketer and all-round athlete, but Richmond, having seen the demonstration, declined. De Quincey talked about the extraordinary strength of Wilson's achilles tendon, and of the unusually easy way in which he moved, "barely to see him even walk round a table was a pure delight to an eye at all learned in the fluencies of motion".[32]

Christopher North begins his review gently with a light-hearted description of how men sit, and suggests to Capt Clias that he has started his book at the wrong place; instead of starting with walking, perhaps Capt Clias should have started with sitting, given instructions on how to do it, and provided illustrations in the form of plates. Then Christopher North corrects himself - no, he was wrong – it should all begin with lying down. This sets the tone. There is a gentle tone of mockery in the serious way he addresses Capt Clias. It soon becomes clear that this is not a review of a book in the traditional sense; it is more about Capt Clias. Christopher North pays no attention to much of the book, indeed there is little to say about a lot of it. It comprises largely of lesson plans and his book is simply a series of descriptions of what he did –

EXERCISE I.
*Ordinary Step.—Explanation of preparatory Movements.**

> At the word of command—"Fall in,"—all the boys advance upon the same line, preserving between each other the distance of the arm's length. At the word, - "Dress," - each boy places his right hand on the left shoulder of the next, extending his arm at full length, and turning his head to the right. At the word, -"Attention," - the arms fall down by the side, and the head returns to the first position. . . . At the word, - "Hips," - each boy places his hands on his sides.

And so on.

Capt Clias liked systems, classifications, progressions, for he was, in fact a teacher, but the book was written as, and presented as, an academic paper based on scientific principles, and supported by various august bodies. Footnotes are added to give status to the utterances, and a tone of high seriousness is given to the first few pages by dropping names – Galen, Esculapius, Herodicus, Plato, Icus, Celse, Tracybulus, Diodes, Pradagores, Phylotemes, Erasitrates, Erophylus, and Theon, and then on to Aetius, Oribasse, Mercurialis, Sanctorius, Fabricius of Hilden, Sthal, Baglivi, Plempius, Johnstone, Sydenham, Fuller, Boerhaave, and Van Swieten . . . all before the end of page seven!

On p. 33, Clias arrives at *Exercise IX - kicking*.

> This exercise consists in throwing the feet alternately straight forward, as if forcibly striking at some object in front, and it may be made either advancing or retreating. When well performed, it acts powerfully on the muscles of the back and other parts of the body. It is also very useful as a means of defence against the attack of an animal, and in many other cases. The inhabitants of the mountains, in many European countries, fight in this manner, without making use of their hands, which they place in their bosoms or on their backs.+
>
> + The Highlanders, in Scotland, and the inhabitants of Gouggisberg, in Switzerland.

Christopher North is still in gentle mood and writes "but, our dear Captain, they do use their hands, once perhaps every five minutes during a battle." When it comes to running, however, the mood changes. North is not convinced by Clias's habit of generalising and treating all men as being the same, and explains why. Then he begins one of his digressions -

> Runners generally find out their own balance; and there would be as little sense in criticising the apparent awkwardness of a winning man, as in eulogising the elegance of a laggard.
>
> Before leaving this part of the Captain's treatise, however, we beg leave respectfully and kindly to hint, that he does not seem to be at all acquainted with the history of British Pedestrianism. Now without such knowledge no man can be said thoroughly to understand the science of Gymnastics.

Christopher North then goes on to demolish Clias's claims about how fast and how far a man can go whilst running or walking. There is, it seems, no respectful and kindly way of telling a man he doesn't know what he is talking about. There was, in truth, no common ground between Christopher North and Capt Clias. For North, running was all about racing – competing head to head with an adversary, or pitting oneself against the watch – a public contest in which there were winners and losers. To Clias, running was a class exercise, part of a programme for all-round fitness. To Clias, running was educational – everyone was a winner. North repeatedly demonstrates, however, that Clias spoke with authority about things he knew little or nothing about – and that was not just running and walking – when it came to his section on wrestling, North lost patience –

> If he knows nothing at all about them, which we suspect is the case, then why should our unfeigned respect for his character, and admiration of his bodily accomplishments, prevent us from saying that he is not thoroughly qualified for the responsibility, and, we presume, lucrative situation which he now holds?

No-one should read Captain Clias to learn anything about athletics, running, jumping, or throwing (or any sport), or indeed, anything about athletes – he knew nothing about any of these either (though, sadly claiming that he did). It is at this point that Christopher North takes off into wonderful digressions about runners, jumpers and throwers and their performances. We learn about the rates at which men can walk and run various distances, and how much we might wager on their success or failure; about the range of performances that we might expect for the high jump, the standing and running long jumps, and triple jumps. We hear about Capt Parker (a walker), Metcalfe (a miler), Wood (a middle-distance runner), Rainier (an ultra-runner), Inglesby and Ireland (high jumpers), and Laird Shaw, a jumper from Kilbride who stood 6ft 3½ inches (1.92m) in height. We learn about the relationships between height, weight, age and performance, and get an eye-witness account of how Inglesby cleared the bar – he "despised perpendicularity, and swayed himself over almost horizontally with singular grace, elegance, and facility" – a sort of back-layout scissors? Grass to grass again, and landing on his feet, of course; no soft landing area. Wilson had seen him clear a stick 6ft 2 inches high (1.88m); so, no rope-clearance with a sag in the middle. And in another eye-witness account we hear that Abraham Wood, the great Lancastrian runner, was "the most beautiful of all runners."

Captain Clias, and Christopher North's review of his book, are not of any interest, perhaps, in themselves. But they do have an effect on the formation of the Six-Feet Club.

The Sir Walter Scott, Christopher North, James Hogg connection.

The Six-Feet Club was formed in Edinburgh just as this debate was going on and when the gymnastics craze was at its height. Gymnastics had already arrived in Edinburgh and was being practiced at Herriot's Hospital.[33] The Six-Feet Club had been formed, and its founder, Birrell, and his circle of early members and supporters, were deciding what sort of club it should be. Birrell had always had in mind an imposing body of men suited to be a body-guards on ceremonial occasions. They would have to be fit and strong for that, but it is interesting that their initial purpose was described as preparing men "for the express encouragement, practice, and promotion of all national and manly games" – not gymnastics. Birrell was interested in gymnastics, so other voices must have been heard and held sway. Among them was Sir Walter Scott. He was

a friend of Birrell's and had been in on the discussions about the formation of the club from the beginning. His voice would have supported something traditional, something identifiably Scottish. He would not have supported Clias's Gymnastics that did not have a vestige of Scottishness in them. There can be no doubt that Scott was involved at this stage; he had applied to join, been measured, found to be a quarter of an inch above six-feet, and so was a full member of the Six-Feet Club. Prof Wilson had also applied, but had been turned down. After measurement, they said he was a quarter of an inch too short. This was no surprise to Wilson – he had always said he was an *inch* below six feet. Nevertheless, he seemed to have become accepted as a kind of special friend of the Club, who attended their meetings and even helped organise them. Everyone knew what Prof Wilson thought about Capt Clias and his Gymnastics and, if there was any doubt, he returned to the theme in November 1826 in his *Noctes Ambrosianæ*. These were supposed conversations between himself, the Ettrick Shepherd (James Hogg) and Timothy Tickler (Robert Sym, Prof Wilson's brother-in-law). He makes fun of Capt Clias and Prof Voelker, deliberately misspelling their names (to *Cleeas* and *Voelkner*), and even suggests that gymnastics is so new and strange that no-one knows how to pronounce it. The Shepherd says *jymnastics* but Tickler insists on a hard G, and "GGGhhymnastics" is finally resorted to.

James Hogg could never have been a member of the Six-Feet Club - he was far too short - but he was certainly a lover of the traditional sports of Scotland, and although, like Scott, was in his late 50s, was still a fit and active man who was remembered as one of the best runners and leapers around in his youth[34] and he wrote nostalgically of that time –

> And I decided, with placid brow,
> That at the leap, the race, or the throw,
> Or tuneful lay of the greenwood glen,
> I was the chief of the sons of men.[35]

Athletic sports ran in his blood and he was proud of his maternal grandfather – William Laidlaw aka *Will o'Phaup*, who "many a race he ran ... and in all his life he never was beat".[36] James Hogg was eccentric and as close to being a genius as, perhaps, one can get; he was a sublime poet of the old school, and beloved by all for his talent as well as for his eccentricities.

All three men were very important to the social, intellectual and cultural life of Scotland, and all were literary luminaries of the highest order, yet all three came together in these early days of the Six-Feet Club, either as members, or as its special friends. And all had a formative influence on it. Birrell's early interest was in creating a suitable body of imposing men for a body guard and was interested in gymnastics; and yet when their first public General Meeting took shape there was no sign of gymnastics. Track and Field Athletics was, of course, unknown, so was never an option as decisions were being made about the programme of events. We can imagine Sir Walter Scott speaking up for archery and perhaps wrestling because of the medievalism, and for the Highland sports of putting the weight and throwing the hammer, because they were so uniquely Scottish. Prof North would have undoubtedly spoken for wrestling - "for all athletic amusements of the people, wrestling is beyond doubt the best",[37] he wrote. He would also have spoken for leaping and throwing. James Hogg would also have spoken for running, leaping and throwing. In the event, we know (see above) that the events settled on were Quoits, Putting the Stone, and the Steeple Chase. The Six-Feet high members were all big men, of course, and that may explain why they favoured the throws. Among those listed as being among the spectators at their first public event was Prof North, and he also played a significant part in the evening festivities that followed, in the *Waterloo Hotel*.

The St Ronan's Border Club.

Just after Christmas in 1823, Walter Scott published a novel of a fictional spa town called *St Ronan's* in the Scottish Borders;[38] it seems to have been set in the years between 1809 and 1812, when the Peninsular War was at its height. It was Scott's only novel placed in the 19th century

and, although not popular with the critics, was better received by the public and was successful as a play.[39] When the public learned that its venue was based on Innerleithen, which did indeed have an ancient well with healing properties, tourists began to visit it to see for themselves, perhaps in the way that tourists now go to Bampton in England's Cotswolds because it is one of the fictional venues of the television drama *Downton Abbey*.

All towns like tourist – they spend money - and the townspeople of Innerleithen approached their most famous son, James Hogg, the *Ettrick Shepherd*, to seek his advice on how the tourists could be further encouraged. His advice – an annual summer sporting event, named to capitalise on Sir Walter Scott's book, and to be called *General Meetings* like the one that the Six-Feet Club had just put on. There was a clear link between the two events; it wasn't just James Hogg, Prof Wilson, together with Hogg, ran the show, they "superintended the arrangements of the day", [40] and it was all based on Scott's original idea. Nor was this the end of the Six-Feet Club's connections – they put up one of the prizes (a handsome silver medal for wrestling, inscribed with the Six-Feet Club motto – and presented on the day by Prof Wilson), and some of the Six-Feet Club members travelled to Innerleithen and took part in the competitions. Adam Wilson, one of the Six-Feet Club's star performers, won four events - the running long leap, 20lb weight-throw, throwing the 13lb hammer, and upward running leap (High Jump). In the evening festivities, Prof Wilson took the chair, at *Mr Parke's Inn*, until 11pm, when James Hogg took over. So involved in all aspects of the meeting were the members and friend of the Six-Feet Club, that it seems unlikely, if even possible, that it could have put on without them.

The First General Meeting of the St Ronan's Border Club was a much larger affair than the Six-Feet Club's. It had three jumping events, three throwing events, and four running events (plus two wrestling events). The results were –

Hop Step and Leap	Mr Steele	37'6"	
Running (Long) Leap	Mr Adam Wilson (SFC)	17'9"	won with ease
Putting the 16lb Stone	Goodfellow (Mr Hogg's servant)	37'6"	prize: a blue bonnet
Putting the 20lb Stone	Steele & Adam Wilson	25'	
Throwing the 13 lb Hammer	Mr Adam Wilson (SFC)	94'6"	without difficulty
Wrestling	Mr George Scougal (Innerleithen)		32 competitors. Prize: silver medal given by SFC.
Wrestling	Mr W. Scott		16 competitors
Running. Race 1 (longer)	Burnet		
Running. Race 2 (longer)	Goodfellow		
Running. Race 3 (shorter)	Mr Nibbs (England)		style much admired
Running. Race 4 (shorter)	Mr Nibbs (England)		
Upright Running Leap (HJ)	Mr Adam Wilson (SFC)	5'2"	

In the coming years the Six-Feet Club would get even closer to the St Ronan's Border Club Games even though the two clubs' events were not exactly the same. The following year, Sir Walter Scott and Prof Wilson were again present, and James Hogg was one of the judges. The Six-Feet Club again donated a silver medal for wrestling. Quoits was added to the programme and Adam Wilson won it, and also the High Leap. In the evening Prof Wilson again took the chair. By 1831, James Hogg was Captain of the St Ronan's Border Club, and Henry Bell and Adam Wilson (both members of the Six-Feet Club) were also officers; indeed both had been Captains of the Six-Feet Club;[41] the memberships of the two clubs were beginning to merge. By 1835, however, the St Ronan's Border Club believed itself to be the stronger, and issued a challenge.[42] There were signs that the Six-Feet Club was already in decline.

The Six-Feet Club after 1827

In November 1827, the Six-Feet Club held their first winter meeting. It does not seem to have been particularly successful; there were four events and the same man, their Captain, David Birrell, won them all. As it was winter, the events differed a little from the summer – two hammer-throwing events, one rifle-shooting, and a game of single-stick. Three silver medals were on offer, so the results of the two hammer-throwing events were combined and the winner got "an elegant Silver medal with appropriate figure".[43] David Birrell donated the silver medal for Single-Stick, and then won it himself! Once again, Prof Wilson and James Hogg (plus "other Gentlemen of distinction") were present at the meeting and at the "excellent dinner" in the evening at the *Royal Hotel*.

In May 1828, the Six-Feet Club held their second Spring meeting. It was a much larger event than the previous year with the three events of 1827 expanding to six in 1828. They kept the Quoits and Steeple-Chase events from the previous year, and slightly varied the putting event from *Putting the Stone*, to *Putting the 21 lb Bullet*. Two hammer throwing events were added, *16 lb 2oz* and *12 lb*, a *Hop Step and Leap*, and a *sing-stick* bout, though this latter event seems to have been an exhibition event and no details are given of the competitors in it; and there seems to have been no winner. Clearly, lessons were being learned and new events were introduced from the experiences at the St Ronan's Border Games, and their own November meeting. Adam Wilson was now the Captain of the Club.

Quoits (10lbs)	**A. McFarlane**			**16 competitors. Silver medal in shape of a quoit**
Putting the 21lb Iron Bullet	**Mr Wilson**		**32'8"**	**elegant silver medal**
Steeple Chase (about 1 Mile)	**Mr Wilkie, Esq**	**3½ min**	**8 competitors. Silver medal.**	
Putting the 20lb Stone	**Steele & Adam Wilson**	**25'**		
Throwing the Hammer (16 lb 2oz)	**Mr Adam Wilson**		**91'**	**astonishing distance**
Throwing the Hammer (12 lb)	**Mr Adam Wilson**		**105'**	**no less surprising**
Single Stick				**a few spirited rounds.**
Hop Step and Leap	**J. McEwen, Esq.**		**40'**	**on very indifferent ground**

Other things were afoot, however, for the Six-Feet Club. It had always been David Birrell's intention to make the Club fit to be a guard of honour on ceremonial occasions. There was, however, no King to guard as in 1822 so he opted for the Hereditary Lord High Constable of Scotland (the Earl of Errol). When the offer was put to the Earl, he accepted at once because it would "revive some of the symbols of that dignity which anciently belonged to his high office".[44] It is easy to see the spirit of Sir Walter Scott in all of this. This took Birrell, Sir Walter Scott and the Earl of Errol back to that day in August 1822 when the Celtic Club guarded George IV in Edinburgh. Walter Scott organised it – David Birrell was in it - and it was the Hereditary Lord High Constable of Scotland (the Earl of Errol) who had the formal, ceremonial responsibility for "preserving the peace in Scotland within four miles of the King's person",[45] and who presented the keys of Edinburgh castle to the King to allow him to enter.[46]

When the members of the Six-Feet Club were informed, in July 1828, that the Earl of Errol had accepted the club's offer, they knew that it was another defining landmark in their history. In recognition of the part that Sir Walter Scott had played in it, the club appointed him an "honorary member", and "umpire, for life, in all manly exercise".[47] He was already an ordinary member so this was a purely symbolic appointment, though it probably meant that he wouldn't be called on to pay his annual fees! To fix this new status firmly into the very fabric of the club, its name was changed – henceforth it would be called, "*The Scottish Six Feet Club, Guard of Honour to the Lord High Constable*". For David Birrell, the club had now achieved what he had always wanted. It was a ceremonial Guard of Honour to one of the highest public figures in the land, it had rules of which they were proud, they had a motto, and they would soon have a uniform. They were patrons too, awarding silver medals to the St Ronan's Border Club, and facilitators, if not initiators, of their Games. They now had recognition and prestige to excess.

The club's motto - *Scientia viribus juncta* – is not easy to translate into modern English. It is too crude to render it as, *science together with force*, but that gives the broad idea – *Join Knowledge to Force* or, *Apply Force with Knowledge*, perhaps? It wasn't just a fitness club for tall men - it was a thinking man's club fitness club, though not a gentleman's club, in the stuffy sense of the phrase; they would never have asked James Hogg to be their poet laureate and to attend their functions and officiate at their events if that had been their nature. Their rules were very important to them too, and in 1829, they had a summary of them printed for wider circulation beyond the club members.[48] I have not been able to find a copy of them, but they were a very significant part of the club, and an important part of its legacy. Nearly forty years later, in 1867,[49] David Birrell (who was by then the manager of *Dunfermline Athletic Club*) formally presented a copy of the Six-Feet Club rules to the Chairman of the Dunfermline Athletic Club, hoping and expecting that they would be adopted by them. By then, the fitness and athletics message had become linked to the temperance one, and Birrell commented that some of the athletic members of the Six-Feet Club drank too much; but they were probably no different in that, from the members of any other club.

They had a smart and expensive uniform, indeed, more than one. They had a dress uniform with a double breasted coat "of the finest dark green cloth", with a velvet collar, and the club buttons carrying the club motto. When competing, they wore dark green frieze jackets (frieze is a coarsely-woven woollen cloth), though this may have been confined to fencers and some other "gymnastic" exercises.[50]

One thing they did *not* have was a member who took on the responsibility of sending the results of the General Meetings to the press, and we begin to lose sight of their results after the summer of 1828. The May and November meetings continued, but we only get patchy results from the papers and sometimes none at all. This may not have been only because no-one sent in the results; around this time we can see that the club began to diversify and its members pursued other interests. The General Meetings went on, but perhaps they did not hold the central position in the club that they once did.

The November General Meeting in 1828 seems to have taken place on 1st December, but perhaps it was delayed because they combined the event with the opening of their new Hall, or exercise rooms, on Thistle Street East in Edinburgh's New Town. To mark the opening, the club put up a new silver medal to be competed for – a Scottish Broad-Sword competition. Sir Walter Scott and Prof Wilson were there, of course. Prof Wilson was an Umpire – though not the Club's Umpire – that was Sir Walter Scott. That year their winter sports were indoors. Two weeks later, the club turned their attention to Golf, and took on, and beat, the Burntsfield Links Golfing Society by seventeen holes. The Six-Feet Club members were establishing themselves as sporting all-rounders; and their new rooms were open every day.

In the summer of 1829, the St Ronan's Border Games were again held and after the Games a toast was made to Prof Wilson, who was described as the "late president of the club",[51] so he must have been their president in the year they were formed, or the following year, though there is no record of it at the time - another link with the Six-Feet Club, and another explanation for the type of event they favoured. Also in 1829, they advertised for a piper in order to attract more visitors; the St Ronan's border Games were changing too, and to attract visitors and tourists.[52] Already they were aware that they were becoming a tourist attraction and were willing to change to meet the tourists – it was no longer a purely sporting event.

In November the Six-Feet Club actually held their General Meeting in December again. There were two main events – rifle-shooting (won by Mr Smith) and Hammer Throwing (won by Mr Martin). Sir Walter Scott was there, as always, but James Hogg was ill and sent his apologies – "in

no society have I ever been, in which I have seen the same gentlemanly temperance, suavity, and good humour, as in the Six Feet Club,"[53] he wrote.

For a couple of years, records seem to be missing but, in the summer of 1831, the Six-Feet Club were still giving a silver medal for wrestling at the St Ronan's Border Games, suggesting that they had done so every year, and one of their members won the rifle-shooting. Adam Wilson, an old Captain of the Six-Feet Club was now an officer of the St Ronan's Border Club.

In November 1831, we get another glimpse of the Six-Feet Club's November Meeting. Henry Bell won the Steeple-Chase in the snow, but the report shows that they had moved to a field in Cannonmills, presumably, not far from Powderhall. Henry Glassford Bell was now Captain – to add to the literary accomplishments of the club. He was a friend of Sir Walter Scott, Prof Wilson, and James Hogg, worked on *Blackwood's*, and in 1828, at the age of only 25, had become editor of the *Edinburgh Literary Journal.* As he crossed the finishing line to win the steeple-chase in 1831, the two-volume set of his poetry, *Summer and Winter Hours*, was hot off the presses, and he had already published a *Life of Mary Queen of Scots.* Has any sporting club ever had such a wealth of literary connections? Will any ever again?

In 1834, the General Meeting was held on a Saturday in July, and it poured with rain all day. Club silver medals were again on offer for rifle shooting, quoits, hammer throwing, putting the stone, and on the Monday the club's medal for golf was played for on the Burntsfield Links. Adam Wilson won it, and was again described as the Captain of the Club.[54]

Despite the sparse information about the Club it seems to have been in good shape, and their reputation was as high as ever – in August 1834 *Dunkeld Highland Society* challenged the *St Ronan's Border Club* to settle which one was the best in Scotland, and the officers of the *Six-Feet Club* were to be the judges.

In 1835 the Six-Feet Club had 135 members with a Management Committee of seven. Two of these were designated "Grand Measurers" who checked the height of all new members using a contraption of "two upright bars of wood fixed into a small moveable platform, having a cross bar, six feet from the ground, so fastened that it can be raised above, but not depressed below the proper height; *and if a sheet of writing paper can be got between the head of the aspirant for the honour of being a member, and the before-mentioned cross bar, he is declared "wanting".*" The candidate must present himself "*in his stocking soles*". I have dwelt on these details simply to show how particular they were about measurement. Surely, such a club could be trusted to measure the athletic performances of its members accurately too, so perhaps, theirs are results that can be trusted. The best performances by club members were reported to be [55]–

		Feet. Inch
Hop, Step, and Jump	**J. McEwan, Esq.**	**40 0**
Standing Leap	**Adam Wilson, Esq.**	**11 7**
Running Leap **[LJ]**	**Adam Wilson, Esq.**	**15 4**
Putting the Stone (19lbs)	**David Scott, Esq.**	**29 3**
(*21lbs*)	**Adam Wilson, Esq.**	**32 8**
Throwing the Hammer (16lbs)	**A. Wilson, Esq.**	**91 6**
	J. Martin, Esq.	**84 3**

These seem to have been the best performances in their own General Meetings, as there were better ones reported when they competed elsewhere; the two Putting the Stone results seem to have been transposed.

The Six-Feet Club celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 1836; Adam Smith was still winning medals, and it was announced that the Club was going to take part in sailing and enter a Regatta on the Firth of Forth.[56] By then however, Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg had died and new voices were influencing the Club. Slowly it seems to have slipped away – there are no more reports of its

General Meetings and, although I have found no reports of it being wound up, there are no further reports of any of its activities.

Looking back, Adam Wilson was the athletic star of the Six-Feet Club, and also encouraged and supported other Games too, from Innerleithen in the Borders to Sutherland in the north. In August 1836 it was reported that Adam Wilson "very kindly took a prominent part in the arrangements" for the *Sutherland Games* in the far north of mainland Scotland, and the newspapers acknowledged his feats in the Border Games too; but he was still described as Captain of the Six Feet Club.

Adam Wilson was clearly a formidable athlete and George Rowland described his "great powers as a universal gymnast".[57] He was over 6'1" in height, and was a great all-rounder who must have made fellow competitors quake when he arrived to take them on. His best performances seem to have been -

		Feet. Inch
Standing Leap [St LJ]	**.**	**11 7**
Running Leap [LJ]	**.**	**17 9**
High Leap [HJ]		**6 1**
Hop Step and Jump [TJ]		**40**
Putting the Stone (18 lbs)		**34 7**
(21 lbs)	**.**	**32 8**
(22 lbs)		**31 10**
Throwing the Hammer (12 lbs)		**105**
(13 lbs)		**94 6**
(16 lbs 2oz)		**91 6**

Quoits	**won at St Ronan's Border Games,**	**1828**
Golf	**won the SFC club medal**	**1834**

He was, perhaps, the first great all-round Scottish athlete, in whose footsteps Donald Dinnie would follow.

The Six-Feet Club would be important even if it was only because three literary giants of the early nineteenth century came together in it to promote and organise sport. Its example of putting on public sporting events in the heart of Edinburgh, that drew some of the most influential people in Scotland to see them, is also important. But its role in helping form and guide the *St Ronan's Border Club* had an influence that would long outlive the club itself. The St Ronan's Border Games are still held annually and call themselves "Scotland's oldest organised sports meeting"[58] The Six-Feet Club itself, however, was particularly proud of its record in establishing agreed rules for hammer throwing.

> there formally existed a great difference of opinion as to the best method of throwing [the hammer]; the following has always been adopted by the club, and is now generally allowed to be the most efficient. If the weight be under 14lbs, throw single handed, and with a turn of the body; if from that to 18lbs, throw with both hands, and with a turn, if above that weight throw with both hands, but *without* a turn; ...
> ... putting *the stone* ... great care ought to be taken that the ball or stone, be patted *straight from the shoulder* ... The proper weight of the ball is from 18 to 24 lbs.[59]

The shafts of the hammers were made of thin ash, and of a length to suit the thrower.[60]

Today, 188 years after these rules were first adopted by the Six-Feet Club, it is accepted internationally that the Hammer is 16 lbs in weight and is thrown two-handed and with a turn (or several), and that the Shot is 16 lbs in weight and put *straight from the shoulder*. The Six-Feet Club's rules for Hammer Throwing and Shot Put are now enshrined in the IAAF's. The Six-Feet Club may have lasted only ten years or so in Edinburgh, but its influence was felt much longer and far

away from Edinburgh. In the Hammer Throw and Shot Put at least, the spirit of Six-Feet Club is still alive today.

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[1] *The Glasgow Herald*, 17 August 1871.

[2] *The Dunfermline Saturday Press, and West of Fife Advertiser*, 18 May 1867.

[3] *The Glasgow Herald*, 17 August 1871.

[4] *Bell's Life in London, and Sporting Chronicle*, 3 May 1835.

[5] George Roland, *An Introductory Course of Modern Gymnastic Exercises*, (Edinburgh: published by the author, 1832), title page.

[6] In 1867 he became the manager of the newly formed Dunfermline Athletic Club (*The Dunfermline Saturday Press, and West of Fife Advertiser*), 18 May 1867.

[7] The Author of the History of Aberdeen, &c., &c., &c. [Walter Thom], *Pedestrianism; or, an Account of The Performances of Celebrated Pedestrians During The Last and Present Century: With a Full Narrative of Captain Barclay's Public and Private Matches; and an Essay on Training*, (Aberdeen: D. Chalmers and Co., 1813), p. 234.

[8] *Ibid*, p. 212.

[9] N.L. Tranter, "The Patronage of Organised Sport in Central Scotland, 1820-1900", *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Winter, 1989).

[10] *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 17 July, 1827. Curiously, the *Caledonian Mercury* printed the same report, four months later, *Caledonian Mercury*, 6 October 1827.

[11] Christian G. Salzmann, Gymnastics for Youth; or a Practical Guide to Healthful and Amusing Exercises for the Use of Schools, (London: J. Johnson, 1800).

[12] The Morning Chronicle, 25 August 1826.

[13] *The Bath Chronicle*, 28 August 1823.

[14] *Annals of Sporting*, Vol. V, No. 25, January 1824, p. 41, and *The Morning Chronicle*, 13 February 1824.

[15] *The Morning Post*, 27 May 1824

[16] *Ibid*.

[17] https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/18055/page/1374/data.pdf [accessed 6 January 2015], and *The Scots Magazine*, 1 September 1824.

[18] *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post: or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 27 April 1826.

[19] *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post: or Plymouth and Cornish Advertiser*, 27 July 1826.

[20] *The Morning Post*, 11 April 1826.

[21] *The Kaleidoscope; or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*, 10 May 1825, p. 383.

[22] *The Examiner*, 30 May 1825, and *The Kaleidoscope, or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*, 10 January 1826, pp. 221-2, and *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 24 June 1826, p. 389.

[23] *The Kaleidoscope; or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*, 10 January 1826, p. 221.

[24] *The Kaleidoscope; or, Literary and Scientific Mirror*, 20 November 1827, p. 168.

[25] *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, Monday 11 February 1828.

[26] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XX, August 1826, pp. 129-151.

[27] "Christopher North," a memoir of John Wilson, late professor of moral philosophy in the University of Edinburgh, comp. from family papers and other sources by his daughter, Mrs. Gordon, with an introduction by R. Shelton Mackenzie., Gordon, Mary (Wilson) Mrs., Mackenzie, R. Shelton (Robert Shelton), 1809-1880, p. 9. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/ABK3689.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext [accessed 9 January 2015]

[28] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XX, August 1826, pp. 129-151. p. 138.

[29] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XXII, January 1828, p. 110. In fact, he had earlier assessed the 'nearly so' as a drop of one inch in a yard (a 2.778% slope) equivalent to a drop of 2½ft if his run up and jump covered 30 yards, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XX, July 1826, p. 108.

[30] *The Schoolmaster, and Edinburgh Weekly Magazine*, 29 December 1832, reprinted from the *Edinburgh Literary Gazette*, 1829.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Thomas de Quincey, *Pagan Oracles*, in 'The Collected Writings of Thomas de Quincey' (ed. David Mason), Vol. VII, (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890), p. 71, reprinted from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1842.

[33] "Noctes Ambrosianæ XXIX", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XX, November 1826, p. 774.

[34] John Gibson Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk*, Volume the Third, 2nd Ed., (Edinburgh, William Blackwood, 1819), p. 141.

[35] From *The Minstrel Boy*, 1828, in *Friendship's Offering, a Literary Album*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1829), pp. 209-212.

[36] David Groves, *James Hogg and the St Ronan's Border Club*, (Dollar: Douglas S. Mack, 1987), p. 6.

[37] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. XX, August 1826, pp. 129-151. p. 143. .

[38] Walter Scott, *St Ronan's Well*, (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable and Co., 1824). Although dated 1824, it was in fact available on 27 December 1823.

[39] *St Ronan's Well*, http://www.walterscott.lib.ed.ac.uk/works/novels/well.html [accessed 9 January 2015]

[40] *The Edinburgh Advertiser*, 17 July 1827, p. 26

[41] *The Morning Post*, 30 November 1831.

[42] *Bell's Life in London, and Sporting Chronicle*, 10 May 1835.

[43] *The Star*, 19 November 1827.

[44] *Caledonian Mercury*, Thursday 17 July 1828

[45] *The Leeds Mercury*, 24 August 1822

[46] *Caledonian Mercury*, Thursday 22 August 1822

[47] *Caledonian Mercury*, Thursday 17 July 1828

[48] Anon, *Summary of the Rules and Regulations of The Scottish Six Feet Club, Guard of Honour to the Lord High Constable*, (Edinburgh: J. Johnstone, 1829).

[49] *The Dunfermline Saturday Press, and West of Fife Advertiser*, 18 May 1867.

[50] *The New Sporting Magazine*, 18 May 1835, Vol. IX, No. 49, pp. 77-79.

[51] *Caledonian Mercury*, 30 July, 1829.

[52] James Hogg, *The Collected Letters of James Hogg, Vol II, 1820-1831*, (Eds. Gillian Hughes, Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. xxxviii.

[53] *The Morning Post*, 4 December 1829.

[54] *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 August 1834.

[55] *The New Sporting Magazine*, 18 May 1835, Vol. IX, No. 49, pp. 77-79.

[56] *The Inverness Courier*, 10 February, 1836.

[57] George Roland, *An Introductory Course of Modern Gymnastic Exercises*, (Edinburgh: published by the author, 1832), p. 40.

[58] http://www.stronansgames.org/ [accessed 14 January 2015]

[59] *The New Sporting Magazine*, 18 May 1835, Vol. IX, No. 49, pp. 77-79

[60] George Roland, *An Introductory Course of Modern Gymnastic Exercises*, (Edinburgh: published by the author, 1832), p. 39.