

The Key

Let me tell you about a key. Let's go back to the thirtieth of April, nineteen hundred and one. It's a Tuesday, two thirty in the afternoon, a clear day but snell. Hundreds of people line Elmbank. A photographer captures the scene. We don't know his name, nor that of the small boy in the foreground whose stare skips a century to meet our eyes. The boy ignores the babble of voices behind him, the anticipation, the laughter and the frowns. It's the first time he's seen a camera, and he'd quite like to know more about the contraption. Meanwhile, in a leather box lined with blue velvet and silk, the key is nestling. Made by John Cameron and Son, jewellers of King Street, where it was inscribed for its new owner. Ornate, brass, solid and satisfying to the touch. Mrs Dick will use it to open this impressive building, while her husband receives the freedom of the burgh. James Dick is rich and although it's threescore and ten since he scabbled in the dirt in Soulis Street he wants to leave a legacy to the town where he was born. His eyes are twinkling and he wears a pansy in his lapel. Provost Mackay returns his smile. This has taken years of coaxing, persuading. Art and literature uplift the soul, Mackay thinks, and surely it's a duty that the wealthy aid the poor. Not everyone agrees. Grumbles are heard. Although the Public Library Act was extended to Scotland in eighteen fifty three there are still those that believe some doors should remain firmly closed. The more educated the working classes become, the harder they'll be to control. That's true, of course. This ornate brass key unlocks more than a door. That wee boy will discover that, when he crosses the threshold. He'll see engines and insects, model ships and the fossils of dinosaurs. He'll walk between the jawbones of a whale. He'll follow the words on a page with his finger, mouthing along as he traverses oceans, battles pirates, unearths treasures. This key is for him. This key is for us. It's in our hands right now. Invisible, yes, but close our eyes and concentrate and maybe we'll feel it, cool and weighty. It's there as we walk between the monkey puzzle trees, up the stone steps, across the mosaic floor and into the lending library. Run our fingers along the shelves, flick through the card file, burl the paperback carousel. Slide a volume from a shelf, part the covers, breathe in. Turn the pages. Everything is here, waiting. Familiar things jostling alongside things we never knew. Imagination is the realm of possibility. Possibility lies between the pages of a book. This is ours. Our words, our ideas, our library. The key is in our hands.