Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. October 1, 1788. I’m Sally Helm.

The peals of the great bell are separated by an ominously long pause…thirty seconds. A full half minute.

We’re not going to stop for thirty whole seconds…because it would feel like a very long time. But to William Brodie, listening to the tolling bell on this October afternoon, it feels all too short. Because William Brodie is a condemned man. And the bell is marking out the final moments of his life.

He stands at a gallows outside the town jail in Edinburgh, Scotland—a medieval building with a tall round tower and the execution platform sticking off the front. A few years earlier, Brodie himself had come to inspect this spot—not as a criminal, but as a respected member of the town council. They were looking for a new place to conduct executions. Brodie approved this one, and even helped design these new gallows. The gallows where he himself will now hang. A convicted thief.

A crowd of forty thousand is gathered to watch. One observer says there have never been so many people at a hanging in Edinburgh. They’ve all heard about this councilor-turned-criminal. And have come to watch him die.

Brodie himself is surprisingly calm. As if he’s not really facing his fate. But maybe somewhere inside him is another Brodie, panicked and full of regret.

Today: Cabinetmaker by day, thief by night. Who was William Brodie, this Scotsman living a double life? And how did he become the inspiration for a famous story written by a fellow Scotsman: The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Before speaking to me, Professor Stephen Brown set off on a walk:

Stephen Brown: Last night anticipating this, I actually went into the core of Edinburgh.

Sally Helm: Down long, winding alleyways. In the shadow of the buildings.

Stephen Brown: Even with modern lighting, it’s still very dark. You could get lost easily. It’s part of the romance of Edinburgh. And I think that's why murder tales, tales of crime have been so important here.
Sally Helm: Brown is an English professor at the University of Trent in Canada, but he spends several months each year in Edinburgh on a research fellowship. And that night, anticipating our interview, he decided to retrace William Brodie's steps.

Sally Helm: Did you feel him at all?

Stephen Brown: I do. I've begun to feel in my quirky old man way that he wants me to tell the whole story.

Sally Helm: That story unfolds like a gripping piece of theater. And William Brodie loved the theater. His favorite play was called The Beggar's Opera.

Stephen Brown: It was a political satire, but it became a romanticization of crime. I mean, you think of all those mafia movies and how that romanticized things, people wanted to live that life because their own life as accountants or real estate lawyers pays the bills but gives them no thrills.

Sally Helm: What was life that was boring him? The sort of equivalent of being an accountant or a real estate lawyer that he found so boring.

Stephen Brown: You support your family. You read your Bible every day. You go to church, and you're always seen to be respectable.

Owen Dudley Edwards: This was still a very Calvinist Edinburgh where people would be judged as to whether in a sense, they were going to be saved by how respectably they behaved. Well, Brodie would've qualified there.

Sally Helm: Owen Dudley Edwards is a history professor at the University of Edinburgh. And he said, Brodie certainly appeared to his neighbors to be a model citizen.

Owen Dudley Edwards: He was genial. He was on the whole good natured.

Sally Helm: He’s a small man, about 5 foot 4. Thick eyebrows, sallow complexion. He’s a bold dresser. Walks with a bit of a swagger. He’d inherited his father’s thriving business making cabinets.

Owen Dudley Edwards: He was from a very respectable trade. He was a prominent freemason. He seems to have been a good public relations man.

Sally Helm: He holds the position ‘deacon of the wrights’—basically, the elected leader of his fellow craftsmen.
Owen Dudley Edwards: By being the deacon of this important profession, he was entitled to a seat on the town council so in other words, quite a distinguished career, quite a distinguished background.

Sally Helm: His father and grandfather had been town councilors before him. Everyone trusts Deacon Brodie.

Owen Dudley Edwards: One story was told afterwards, partly invented, but it's still revealing, of an old lady waking up and seeing what she thinks is a burglar. And then she said, but I saw it was Mr. Brodie. And of course, Mr. Brodie couldn't be a burglar, so I realized I was dreaming and went back to sleep.

Sally Helm: The writer Robert Louis Stevenson would later be fascinated by Brodie. He wrote:

VOICE ACTOR: A great man in his day was the Deacon; well seen in good society, crafty with his hands as a cabinetmaker, and one who could sing a song with taste.

Sally Helm: Brodie’s been hired to replace the doors on many of the town's old buildings. And to fix up his neighbors' locks.

Owen Dudley Edwards: Somebody needs a little repair work to be done. Tells Mr. Brodie the key is in the door and Mr. Brodie comes in.

VOICE ACTOR: “Many a citizen was proud to welcome the Deacon to supper.”

Sally Helm: Had Brodie been content with this cabinetmakers' life, he would’ve had it made. But he’s not content … not at all.

VOICE ACTOR: “He may be seen, a man harassed below a mountain of duplicity.”

Sally Helm: Brodie is bored… and unfulfilled. As Professor Stephen Brown said, his life pays the bills, but it gives him no thrills. Although, it wasn’t all rule-following and town council meetings. Brodie does defy certain social expectations. For one thing, he never marries.

Stephen Brown: He had two mistresses and five children. They didn’t know one another, although they lived within a hundred meters of one another.

Sally Helm: And he likes to gamble at a particular seedy tavern. He doesn’t play fair.

Stephen Brown: He learned how to load dice, how to keep tricks up his sleeve.
**Sally Helm:** He gets into cock fighting—gambling away his money on birds fighting to the death.

**Stephen Brown:** That thrill of putting your money on these two male birds who are gonna rip one another apart appealed.

**Sally Helm:** It's at these taverns and cockfighting matches that Brodie meets his partners in crime.

The first: George Smith, a former locksmith and recent transplant from England.

**Stephen Brown:** He had drifted up into Scotland, had a minor record for petty thefts and crimes from what you read about him, he seems like a weak man who was attracted to Brodie's charisma.

**Sally Helm:** Smith has lost much of his money and turned to gambling to try and make it back. He latches on to Brodie. And they soon add two other men to the group. Andrew Ainslie:

**Stephen Brown:** Ainslie was just like the minor bully.

**Sally Helm:** And John Brown:

**Stephen Brown:** Physically imposing. He was bigger than all the rest. Brown had a number of aliases. One was Humphrey under which he had been banished and was supposed to be transported for seven years from England but escaped.

**Sally Helm:** This is our band of petty thieves. William Brodie: the brains. George Smith - the bankrupt. Andrew Ainslie - the bully. And John Brown - the bruiser.

It’s with these men that Brodie will begin to indulge his darker side. And turn to theft. He starts out with a big advantage. One of his jobs as a councilor is to secure the locks of the doors on Edinburgh’s High Street. Which has boomed of late. Because Edinburgh is undergoing a drastic change. There’s a growing upper class. Fancy Scotsmen living in fancy houses.

**Stephen Brown:** Mansions at 20, 30 rooms, water was piped in for the first time, they had toilet facilities.

**Sally Helm:** Traditionally, wealthy Scots would’ve turned to shops in London for their high-end goods. But Edinburgh has been building an upscale shopping district designed to keep the rich, and their money, in town.

**Stephen Brown:** You can now get your wallpaper made by hand in Edinburgh. You can now get your upholstery done here. You don't have to send to London.
Sally Helm: All this means...money and high-end goods are piling up behind the doors of Edinburgh. And Brodie has the keys.

Stephen Brown: People left their keys hanging just inside their door. He would take the keys, put them in his pocket quickly and make a wax impression and then go back to his shop and make a duplicate key.

Sally Helm: And these were keys to houses or to businesses or what?

Stephen Brown: Houses, shops, the town council, the university. And they would never have questioned what he was up to.

Sally Helm: Brodie and his band may not have been the only crooks in newly rich Edinburgh. There were other burglars at work. But it is clear that some time in 1786, they begin to strike.

October 9: they break into a goldsmith shop and take brooches, earrings, diamond rings.

December 8, they steal from a tobacco shop.

On Christmas Eve, the band of burglars convenes at their favorite tavern. The plan is to set out on a jewelry heist, but Brodie and Smith get wrapped up playing cards. Smith, the bankrupt, quickly loses all his money. But Brodie, the brains, goes on a winning streak. And then refuses to leave the table. So finally, around 4 in the morning, Smith sets off to do the job on his own and pulls it off. Before the sun rises, he’s made off with five gold and three silver watches, and boxes full of rings, lockets and other “gold trinkets.” He’s bankrupt no more, at least for now.

The jewelers are shocked by the theft. Disturbed. They turn to each other and ask; how could this have happened? Didn’t we just replace the lock?

As time goes on and these guys keep stealing, Brown, the bruiser, brings a new tool to the table.

Stephen Brown: With Brown, they actually started using what we would call crowbars, which were wagon irons, to break open the locks to get in. Brown was not subtle.

Sally Helm: August 1787: they steal a big load of fine black tea.

Stephen Brown: The tea one's funny because Brodie was not a strong man, and he couldn't carry his satchel. They had to abandon it.

Sally Helm: The owners recover that satchel and get some of their tea back. But it’s still a huge loss.
Stephen Brown: They don't have insurance, these guys. So once that's gone, it's gone.

Sally Helm: At the end of October, the Brodie gang hits a trendy shoemaker’s shop. Then they go for an even bigger target: the University of Edinburgh. They steal a bejeweled, silver mace, this symbolic metal staff, from the library. It supposedly comes from the tomb of one of the fathers of Scottish universities. They send it off to a dealer in the north of England, and have it melted down. It’s audacious and not without risk. They’re hitting Edinburgh’s society set. Brodie’s peers.

Stephen Brown: The major tea distributor, the most important jeweler in Edinburgh. These were people who were serving him and his betters.

Sally Helm: Are people in Edinburgh noticing these break-ins?

Stephen Brown: Yes, and they’re baffled. It was a culture that had only so recently begun to be concerned about locking the doors. Only so recently had silverware and the like to protect. It was very difficult for them to realize this was organized. A gang was doing it. And that one of their own was a head of the gang.

Sally Helm: They're being betrayed from the inside.

One Sunday morning, while many of Edinburgh’s citizens are at church, Brodie scopes out a local silk shop, and makes a copy of the key. He and the others come back later and take between 300- and 400-pounds worth of luxury silks and fabrics.

The next day, the shop owners announce a reward: 100 pounds for information about the crime. No one comes forward. So, they up the ante. More money—plus an even more valuable prize—"His Majesty's gracious pardon."

The shop owners are banking on the principle that ‘there’s no honor among thieves.’ They hope one of the criminals will win his freedom by ratting out the others.

Brodie and his band of burglars hear about the offer of a pardon but don’t take the bait. They’re too busy enjoying their loot. Brown holds on to a piece of white satin and gives some lead-colored silk to a girl. Brodie keeps gambling. One night that month, he’s with his friends, as they put it, “innocently amusing themselves with a game at dice over a glass of punch,” when he gets into a fight with a chimney sweep, who accuses him of playing with loaded dice. That man then sues Brodie for cheating.

Stephen Brown: And if it was a film, you could see him as this wonderful bit of comic relief. You know, there's these great big issues going on with all of this head bashing with powerful, powerful men and families. And here's this chimney sweep saying, ‘he cheated at
dice, and I want my money back,’ you know? And it gives you that sense of how none of us like being cheated.

Sally Helm: Brodie’s getting cocky. It seems that nothing—not even a proven case of cheating at dice—can tarnish his reputation. So, he decides to launch his biggest theft yet. And rob the government itself.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: In the winter of 1788, William Brodie decides no more stealing from the local tobacco shop. It’s time to go bigger. Starting with Edinburgh’s General Excise Office.

Stephen Brown: It's where the government keeps all their cash. So, on payday, when the taxes come in from the revenue offices, it all goes there.

Sally Helm: What do you make of him wanting to steal that? Is there any sort of significance to that?

Stephen Brown: Yeah, I think like everything else, it's really putting your finger up to the authorities. Saying, I can take anything I can take your university mace. I can bankrupt major merchants, and you don't know who I am. It would be like going into the headquarters of the Bank of America, you know, that's serious stuff.

Sally Helm: One day Brodie and Smith visit the excise office to case the joint. Brodie distracts the cashier, engaging him in a nice conversation, while Smith stands by the door, taking an impression of the key that's hanging there, on a nail.

Next, Ainslie, the bully, strolls by the office a few nights in a row, to determine the night watchman's routines.

Stephen Brown: They know the guy who runs the office, who will have locked everything up, will be gone by eight. And the night watchman has never come on before 10. So, they've got a two hour window to get in and out.

Sally Helm: On the night of March 4, 1788, the four thieves meet at Smith's house to discuss their plan. They decide to bring a wig belonging to Brodie's father, in case they need a disguise. And they work out a special warning whistle.

They’ll bring a rope in case it’s needed for a speedy window escape. And they’ll leave behind a spur as a red herring, to suggest that the thief came on horseback.

Wednesday, March 5. The day of the crime. Brodie passes the afternoon at his brother in law's house, drinking. Then he puts on his black suit, cocked hat, peacoat, and pistol. On his way to
meet his accomplices, he's in good spirits, singing a verse from his favorite play, the Beggar's Opera:

VOICE ACTOR: "Let us take the road; hark! I hear the sound of coaches! The hour of attack approaches; to your arms, brave boys, and load."

Sally Helm: Outside the building, Ainslie is standing watch. Brodie posts up in the hall. The bankrupt Smith and bruise Brown are supposed to enter first and find the goods.

But:

Stephen Brown: They can't find any cash in the drawers they break open. They miss the place where there was over 800 pounds in their rush.

Sally Helm: That's tens of thousands of US dollars today. And right in the heat of the search, they hear footsteps on the stairs. The bruise and the bankrupt realize that their guards, Brodie and Ainslie, must have reacted to trouble by running away.

Stephen Brown: What goes wrong is that the clerk of the ex-checker comes back to his office after eight, which he's never done before, and everybody took off.

Sally Helm: Brown and Smith do manage to make it out of the building. No thanks to Ainslie the bully or Brodie the brains, who failed to even give them the warning whistle. Instead, Brodie fled to the house of one of his mistresses, to establish an alibi. And what, after all that, did they manage to plunder?

Stephen Brown: All they got; I think was something like 18 pounds. I'd have to look at the exact figure, but it was peanuts.

Sally Helm: The bruise John Brown is not pleased. He'd been abandoned by his associates and almost caught by the clerk. The following night, the men meet at Smith's house to divvy up their paltry haul. Brown looks at his share of the take and remembers that offer of a reward for information. So, he drops in at the sheriff's office.

Stephen Brown: Brown went straight to the crown and turned evidence.

Sally Helm: That offer of a pardon is still good. All Brown has to do to get it is confess. He tells the sheriff what he wants to know, including the names of his co-conspirators.

Stephen Brown: Smith's identified. So, they track him down and arrest him and they track down Ainsley and they're in prison.
Sally Helm: Curiously, no one seems to have mentioned the gang’s leader, Deacon Brodie, because no one comes to arrest him. A court transcript suggests that Brown, for one, was withholding Brodie’s name so he could blackmail him later. Brodie needs information on the confusing state of play, so he does something bold: he goes to the jail where his associates are imprisoned…and tries to talk to them.

Stephen Brown: To go over their stories, to make sure they’re not going to fess up to anything and he’s not allowed admission. So, he begins then to suss that something more serious is going on.

Sally Helm: Brodie has a hunch that the authorities are onto him.

Stephen Brown: And he makes his plans then to leave town, which he does.

Sally Helm: Brodie's flight is like a movie chase. The gangster hops on his motorcycle and roars away from the scene of his crime, the police in hot pursuit. Only it’s the 1700s. So, Brodie embarks on a bumpy carriage ride to London.

Stephen Brown: It takes a long time at that point to get from Edinburgh to London, the roads are still crap, you know? So, it, it takes him a good week to get down there by coach.

Sally Helm: A sheriff's bounty hunter is trying to catch up. Brodie’s name and face are everywhere: Have you seen this man? Short guy? Sallow complexion? But Brodie doesn’t stay in London long. He boards a ship and bribes the captain to drop him in the Netherlands. So far so good.

Stephen Brown: He travels under the name of John Dixon, and he meets a couple and gives them these letters. One of them is for the guy who runs the cock fighting, Henderson. Another is for one of his mistresses and the daughter there, some people in the family, his lawyer, a lot of it is about business.

Sally Helm: Brodie gets off the ship at the city of Ostend. The couple continue, agreeing to mail the letters for him.

Stephen Brown: This couple, when they get back to Leith, don't open the letters right away, but they hear about this and they think, gee, that guy looked like Brodie. So, they open the letters first, realize what they are, and they take them to the crown office.

Sally Helm: The crown office realizes this is our guy. They track Brodie to Amsterdam, and enlist the help of an Irishman, who had read descriptions of the fugitive, and recognized Brodie. He helps them out:
Stephen Brown: Tracks him to a boarding house where Brodie is hiding in the closet, and he realizes the game's up, and he gives himself up.

Sally Helm: Brodie is brought back to Edinburgh and thrown in jail to await his trial. In the meantime, the crown has found more evidence. Including a letter addressed to a friend, in which Brodie asks, “what has been done with the two unfortunate men Smith and Ainslie, and the greater villain, John Brown?” The letter goes on: “Whatever they may allege, I had no direct concern in any of their depredations, excepting the last fatal one.” This sentence will be his death knell.

Brodie and Smith go on trial together. And it’s the trial that drew Professor Stephen Brown to Brodie’s story in the first place. It’s widely covered at the time.

Stephen Brown: It goes on for 26 hours straight, starts in the morning, goes all through the night into 11 o'clock the next morning. The area outside the courtroom is packed.

Sally Helm: Packed even though it's an all-night affair. That's crazy.

Stephen Brown: Oh yeah. People had to bring their own lunches and stuff. The justices get brief breaks when they're given claret wine and oat biscuits to keep them going. Braxton who's the head judge is notorious for presiding drunk over trials. Just the bizarre traditions of Scottish law.

Sally Helm: I mean, I'm curious what the vibe around the trial was publicly. Like, were people mad at him? Was there anger in the room?

Stephen Brown: There was a real split. You know, the middle class, everybody who felt betrayed was angry with him. He was already a kind of hero for the underclass. You know, he was that kind of Robin Hood Batman figure. You know, the guy who is fighting against the system.

Sally Helm: Those fellow ship passengers testify against him. So do Ainslie the bully and Brown the Bruiser.

Throughout the proceedings, Brodie is calm. Weirdly calm. The Edinburgh Advertiser writes, “When anything ludicrous occurred in the evidence he smiled as if he had been an indifferent spectator.”

Stephen Brown: Smiles at accounts, makes a little joke. When the verdict is read, he shows absolutely no emotion. It is as if there is a part he's playing.

Owen Dudley Edwards: He had this love of the theater, which made him rather a theatrical person.
Sally Helm: Professor Owen Dudley Edwards again.

Owen Dudley Edwards: And the very end of the trial, Brodie was sentenced to be hanged, bowed to the judges on the bench, in the great 18th century manner, and then as he turned around the burglar who had been put on trial with him, George Smith, had started blubbering and whining because he was being told he was going to be hanged. And evidently Brodie was absolutely furious with him for lowering the tone of the proceedings. And he whirled around and planted an enormous kick up the behind of the wretched George Smith. And that way they made their exit from the trial.

Sally Helm: Brodie and Smith are brought back to jail to await their fate.

Stephen Brown: They say, you know, he would still sing songs from his favorite play, The Beggars Opera and I suspect he did. I'm sure he sang other songs. He read books and things brought into him. He corresponded.

Sally Helm: On October 1, 1788, Brodie writes his last will and testament. A satirical one, in which he bequeaths things to various members of the Edinburgh establishment who he thinks are hypocrites. Like leaving his knowledge of the law to the judges who tried his case, and his dexterity at dice to that chimney sweep he cheated.

At half past two, Brodie is brought to the gallows that he himself had helped improve. A huge crowd is gathered to watch him die. Twice, Brodie approaches the gallows, then has to step back because there’s some problem with the ropes. But finally, with his hand stuck casually into the front of his vest, he steps forward, drops down, and is hanged.

In another time, Stephen Brown says, a criminal like Brodie probably wouldn’t have been sentenced to death. But 1788 Edinburgh, with its new crop of rich people, wants to make an example of him.

Stephen Brown: Edinburgh was determined to become a safe, wealthy city for upper middle class and aristocratic citizens. I can sum it up best by saying one of the trial judges, Lord Hales, wrote in his notes, that to break into a man's house or shop was a more serious crime than to murder him. Cause murder might be spontaneous. It might be an act of passion, but to breach the walls of a man's house, unlike breaching the walls of his body was a carefully calculated act. And that it was important for the law and the state to protect the possessions of their citizens.

Sally Helm: But Brodie’s story does also strike a deeper chord… about the mystery of the moral animal.

Stephen Brown: What makes good people do bad things?
Sally Helm: That's what struck Robert Louis Stevenson, a young Scotsman writing in Edinburgh a hundred years later. He said, "I had long been trying to find a body, a vehicle, for that strong sense of man's double being."

Owen Dudley Edwards: In the 19th century, the young Robert Louis Stevenson as a boy was told that the cabinet in his bedroom was one which had been made by William Brodie in the last century. Good, fine work, obviously done very professional, lasted quite well to Robert Louis Stevenson's time. And he was excited by the story of this strange man who was so respectable in one way and was getting in their doors, and stealing from them, that he began to write a play when he was about 15 or 16 about Deacon Brodie.

Sally Helm: That teenaged attempt hasn't survived, but the later version has. It's called "Deacon Brodie: A Double Life." Stevenson also writes a novella inspired in part by Brodie's life: The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The story explores the idea that:

VOICE ACTOR: All human beings, as we meet them, are commingled out of good and evil.

Sally Helm: In the story, Dr. Jekyll finds a way to split the good and evil parts of himself. Living sometimes as Mr. Hyde, then returning to his better self. Until things go wrong.

Owen Dudley Edwards: Jekyll desperately trying to get back, having turned himself into Hyde and thinking he could do so briefly and enjoying himself while behaving badly and yet wanting to go back and be the good, learned doctor that he had been for most of his life. And that struggle against Hyde at the end is in itself the most frightening thing of the story.

VOICE ACTOR: I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two.

Stephen Brown: I think often in Stevenson, there's been this interest in that doubleness, that complexity of human nature.

Sally Helm: And, Stephen Brown says, that complexity is perhaps also the reason why the story of Jekyll and Hyde—and of William Brodie—still resonate today.

Stephen Brown: I think the side that goes on really appealing to people is that notion that the person sitting beside you might actually be a serial killer. I always say to my students, the most extraordinary thing you do is to lie down in bed with someone who was a stranger to you, fell in love with them and trust that they won't kill you in their, in your sleep. And there's a part of us that always wonders, am I as good as I think I am? Or is there something in me? And I know there's something in me that's very naughty. And will it come out?
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If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests today, professors Stephen Brown and Owen Dudley Edwards. You can listen to Stephen Brown’s lecture on the 250th anniversary of the Encyclopedia Britannica—which was edited by one of the guys who covered Brodie’s trial—at the National Library of Scotland's website. Owen Dudley Edwards’ latest book is called Our Nations and Nationalisms. The voice actor you heard reading Robert Louis Stevenson’s writing is Andrew Latheron.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens, Rebecca Nolan, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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