

MacPherson Family

**THE SHORT LIVES OF
JAMES AND JESSY MACPHERSON:
SOME ASPECTS OF TWO EXPATRIATE
SCOTTISH MERCHANT FAMILIES**

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The portraits

Historians and genealogists encourage researchers to garner every last item of information from our sources, pictorial as well as written. This study starts from the evidence of two portraits done in oil. The genesis of this short paper was a request from an antique dealer based in Wiltshire to identify and explore the backgrounds of the subjects of two portraits. (The portraits are reproduced on the back cover of this journal). The subjects were identified on the back of the canvases as James Macpherson and his wife Jessy Young who were married in London in 1838. For example that for Jessy is inscribed "Jessy Macpherson born Young at Aberdeen, the 7 Oct. 1807". When checked with the appropriate parish registers for Inverness and Aberdeen respectively, these turn out to be baptismal rather than birth dates but identify clearly the two individuals.¹

The painter

The painter Cornelis Cels (1778-1859), had also been identified. He was a Belgian painter² who had trained in the Netherlands and Paris and thereafter spent seven years in Italy. Cels specialised in portraits and religious paintings and, at one stage, had the patronage of the Dutch royal family.³ After his years in Italy Cels remained in the Netherlands for the rest of his life but appears to have been in London in 1836, when he had a painting exhibited at the Royal Academy.⁴

We do not know where Cels painted the portraits: London is most likely, since that is where the couple were married but Rotterdam is also possible since both James and Jessy had been resident there before their marriage.

Fiona Anderson, of the National Museums of Scotland has provided a basic description of the costume aspects of the portraits: Of Jessy's dress she says: "She is wearing a grey silk satin dress in a style that is typical of the early 1840s with its low off the shoulder neckline, short sleeves with flouncing and pleated detail. Her bodice is heavily boned and she will also be wearing a corset to create the appropriate waist shape." Jessy is also wearing a neck chain in gold, a fashion that was becoming rare by the late 1830s. It may be speculated that Jessy's choice of grey may indicate some later stage in mourning apparel, her father having died six years earlier.⁵ As befits the male of the species James Macpherson's dress is less ostentatious. Fiona Anderson notes: "he seems to be wearing a black frock coat (one cut with straight fronts) with velvet trim on the collar (it may be a tail coat with cut-away fronts instead, it is difficult



to say absolutely for certain, as his arm hides what is happening at the waist of the coat). This is born with matching black trousers, a white cotton shirt, brown velvet waistcoat with revers and a black, satin cravat. The portraits show the fairly high status and relative opulence of the sitters. Even the fact that they can afford a painter of Cels's quality and reputation tells us something about the status of James and Jessy.

James Macpherson's family

James Macpherson was born in 1794, one of a family of eight, the son of Donald (sometimes Daniel) Macpherson, a merchant in Inverness, and Barbara, daughter of William Macintosh of Holm, a local laird. The Mackintoshes of Holm were a cadet branch of the clan, itself a part of the much greater Clan Chattan, who had been in possession of a tack of land close to the town of Inverness which had been obtained by an Alexander Mackintosh, Barbara's great-great-great grandfather, in the first half of the seventeenth century.⁶ Confusingly, Barbara had already been married to Kenneth Macpherson, another merchant and sometime Provost of Inverness, as his gravestone in Chapel Yard, indicates.⁷ So far, James's paternal ancestry has not been traced beyond his father.

Jessy Young's family

Janet Young was born in Aberdeen in 1807, the second child and first daughter of James Young and Patience Dingwall Fordyce. She seems to have been known as Jessy, the common pet name for Janet, for the rest of her life. In all, James and Patience had sixteen children. James Young was descended from a merchant family that could trace its lineage among Aberdeen merchants and burgesses at least as far back as the late seventeenth century. In James's day the family speciality was trade in stockings, though this was made less profitable by the onset of the French wars in the 1790s. James Young belonged to the coterie of merchant families, led by the Hadden family that dominated the town council, and therefore civic politics in Aberdeen at the time. They included Cruikshanks and Farquhars as well as Haddens and Youngs.⁸ The zenith in James's civic career was his assumption of the post of Lord Provost of Aberdeen between 1811 and 1813. Hutchison's recent contribution to a new history of Aberdeen identifies Young as part of a controlling and self-seeking clique, which ran the town in the early 1800s. Even by the lamentable standards of local government in Scotland at that time Aberdeen municipal politics were notoriously corrupt. In 1819 a select committee of MPs found much evidence of abuse of power: public money was used for private purposes; land and rights were sold off to friends of councillors; council minutes were altered after having been approved. In 1812 the Town Council admitted to civic debts of £6874: it later transpired that the true figure was between £120,000-£140,000, an astronomical sum in today's terms.⁹

The family of Patience Dingwall Fordyce came from a landed/legal background in Aberdeenshire which can be traced back to 1620, at least under the Dingwall name. Arthur Dingwall Fordyce of Brucklay Castle in Aberdeenshire, Patience's father, was

an advocate and held judicial appointments in Aberdeen as well as being a major owner of housing property in the city of Aberdeen. The family had originally come from Ross-shire about the beginning of the sixteenth century, allegedly to escape the feuds in their own part of the country.¹⁰

With the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 James Young decided to take his family to Rotterdam, in the Netherlands, where he set up as a general merchant. The youngest members of his and Patience's family were born in Rotterdam.

Marriage and death

The presumption is that James and Jessy first met in Rotterdam. Jessy grew up there from the age of 7; at their marriage James is described as formerly a merchant in Rotterdam.¹¹ We know that Cels worked mainly in the Netherlands but probably made occasional visits to London. The couple were married in London on 28 September 1838. James had decided to settle in the mercantile line in China and the family set off by ship for the east. Their only son (no name given) was born in September 1839, presumably on board ship. In the following month their ship was wrecked in the China Sea and the whole family perished. Lloyd's Register records the event as follows: "SUNDA (the name of the ship), Captain Greig from London to China was run on shore on the Island of Hainan (in China Sea) 12 October 1839, with five feet of water in the hold and loss of topmasts and all sails, having experienced a tremendous gale since 7th October. Six passengers and eleven of the crew were drowned, fifteen persons were saved."

It seems relevant to speculate briefly on why James took his young bride to the Orient at this time. Of course those ebullient entrepreneurs, William Jardine and James Matheson had been active in China since the early 1830s in the twin tasks of distributing opium and Christian tracts to the Chinese, often from opposite sides of the same ship. Does James's move to China suggest that his activities in Rotterdam had not been entirely successful and that he had failed to emulate the example of his father in law? Or did he see the new opportunities in China as a chance to add to the pile he had already amassed? And where was he going? The obvious place would seem to be Canton. Western penetration of Chinese ports was in its early stages. Even as the 'Sunda' was entering Chinese waters a crisis was developing in Canton which was to lead to the outbreak of the first Opium War and the British occupation of Hong Kong Island in August 1841. The British Government was only slowly coming round to the idea of armed intervention in China to support the claims of their merchants. In the autumn of 1839 only one sloop was present in the waters east of the Royal Navy's base at Trincomalee in Ceylon.¹²

James's siblings and their descendants

James Macpherson had four brothers and three sisters. Two of the brothers, Duncan and Charles, died of consumption before the age of twenty. Another brother, John, survived to the 1850s but seems not to have married. One sister, Elizabeth died

unmarried in 1863. Two sisters married: Barbara to John Nicol, a doctor in Inverness; Eliza to James Mackie, Established Church minister at Alves, in Morayshire.¹³ At this stage we cannot be sure if any descendants of James's siblings survive.

Jessy's siblings and their descendants

Of Jessy's fifteen brothers and sisters nine died in childhood. Two of her brothers, became merchants in Antwerp, perhaps a sign that trade was less good in Rotterdam. Only one sister married and raised a family. By the time James and Jessy elected to go to China, Jessy's parents were also dead, Patience Dingwall Fordyce, aged 40 in 1827, James Young seven years later. By the late 1830s the Young family in Rotterdam was clearly much depleted. We know too little about how successful James Young's sons had been in Rotterdam but they would have found it hard to emulate the offspring of James's brother Gavin, who almost universally found careers in the army in India, his sisters marrying Indian army officers. Their Dingwall Fodyce cousins also took their places in the local Aberdeen elite and in the British Empire at large. Patience's brothers and nephews pursued a variety of naval, military, legal and clerical careers. Her nephew Alexander retired from the Royal Navy as a Commander and served as M.P. for Aberdeen between 1847 and 1852. His son William represented Aberdeen County in Parliament between 1866 until his death in 1875.¹⁴

Conclusion

This study is as yet incomplete. There is insufficient data to draw general conclusions regarding the fate of expatriate merchant communities. So much would depend on the entrepreneurial skills of individual merchants and on the general economic and trade conditions under which they operated. A full citation of the genealogical aspects of the Macpherson, Macintosh, Young and Dingwall Fordyce families will be placed in the Family History File in the Scottish Genealogy Society Library. Further information and comments from readers on these families are welcome.

Notes

Thanks are due to Caroline Gerard for her research in Aberdeen and to John D. Stevenson for discovering the fate of James and Jessy. I am also indebted to Fiona Wilkinson, Senior Curator of Dress and Textiles, National Museums of Scotland, for her advice on costume.

References

- ¹ Standard genealogical sources used in this article include Old Parish Registers, Census records and death certificates.
- ² Cels was born a subject of the Holy Roman Empire, was transferred to the French Republic, and subsequently Empire (1792-1814). He became a citizen of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1814, and only became a Belgian with that nation's independence in 1831.
- ³ C. Benezit, *Dictionnaire des peintures, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, Paris, 1999, vol. 3, p. 405. ; Dictionary of Art, London, 1996, vol. 6, p.151.
- ⁴ *Royal Academy of Arts. Royal Academy Exhibitors*, 1905, vol. 2, p.19.