

Francis Robbie of Birse (1753–1839)

Part 1

Francis Robbie, my 4g-grandfather, was a remarkable man, especially given the circumstances of his time, when most people spent their whole lives within one locality. Yet Francis, who lived in Scotland, England, Wales, Ireland and the West Indies, was adventurous and more widely travelled even than most of his present-day descendants – of whom there are many, since he married three times and had six children who reached adulthood. And, as he is the earliest ancestor of whom we can be sure and about whom much is known, he is the starting point and the common denominator in many Robbie family genealogy tables.

This two-part article is abridged from my short biography, *A Son of Birse: The Life and Times of Francis Robbie (1753–1839), Farmer and Soldier*, available at King Street but without yet claiming completeness. I began my family-history research in 2000, and have benefited from contacts with relatives and other researchers in addition to the printed and Internet sources in Part 2. My first contact was Ann Ferguson in Scotland; and I am greatly indebted to David W. Robbie, especially for material on Francis's army career. A wealth of information can also be found on Mark A. Robbie's website (temporarily unavailable) and via Ken Doig's homepage.

Heather Saunders in Australia first alerted me to the existence of Ann Robbie's Bible notes (hereafter "the ARB notes"). Ann (1825–1915), a granddaughter of Francis, was the eldest of 11 children of Archibald, Francis's eldest child by his third wife. Ann, born at Bald Craigs, Cookney, Kincardineshire, married Alexander Coutts from Glenmuick, Aberdeenshire, in 1849, and in 1851 they emigrated with their young sons James and Alexander to Ontario. The ARB notes, probably written by Ann herself, were in a family Bible now kept by her great-grandson, Cecil C. Coutts, of British Columbia. The notes begin with the birth of Francis in 1753 and end with Ann's marriage at Mosscroft in 1849. Since they seem to be all in the same handwriting, they must have been written retrospectively and must rely on memory and handed-down information. They are therefore not totally reliable on dates, but have provided a great deal of information that has been verified by other records.

Francis's background and early life

Francis Robbie was born on 30th September 1753 at Balfiddie, a small farm north of the Water of Feugh in the parish of Birse, which lies south of the River Dee and is the most southerly parish in Aberdeenshire. In *An Account of the Parish of Birse* (1865), Robert Dinnie gives a description of Birse 100 years previously; it was about 10 miles long by 10 miles wide, with many hills, woods, streams and valleys. Its main streams were the Feugh, the Cattie and the Birse waters, each with a main inhabited area in its valley. The inhabited districts were divided into 24 "towns" or farms, each consisting of several households belonging to the tenant, subtenants with land, subtenants without land and hired servants. In the 1750s, there were probably about 1,100 people living in the parish.

Also in 1753, the first wheeled cart appeared in the parish; but it was some time before they became common. Loads like manure, fuel and grain were moved by packhorses in creels or bags. Farmers themselves travelled mainly on foot. Ploughing was all done with oxen. The local farmers not only built their own houses and farming implements but also made their own furniture, shoes, clothes, stockings and mittens. Women specialised in carding, spinning and dyeing; but men wove the cloth that was sold at local county fairs and nearby towns. Dinnie's descriptions of the people of Birse in 1765 included the following:

Few ... have been born to letters, yet none are illiterate. The English or Scotch language is universally spoken; a few inhabiting the forest understand the Gaelic, but these came originally from the upper part of the country. ... The natives of Birse are mostly of a low

stature. This is said to be owing to their inter-marrying so much among themselves. They are, however, a very hardy race, though not so strong and athletic as formerly. Their mode of living is spare and temperate, from which the body derives both good health and vigour. The greater number of the people are very sagacious and possess a cool and calculating foresight. They are still very kind and hospitable to one another, and also to strangers; although in the latter respect much behind their forefathers.

Francis Robbie's parents were probably William Robbie and Janet Simpson, who married on 23rd January 1751 in Glenmuick, Aberdeenshire. William was possibly the William Robbie born in 1708 in Peterculter, Aberdeenshire. In 1753, Francis's father was probably a tenant farmer at Balfiddie, in Feughside, which was owned by the powerful Farquharson family of Finzean. It was enacted in 1616 that there should be a school in every parish in Scotland – and the first records of Birse parish school date to the 1690s. It had a record of attracting able teachers who provided a good education for the local children. Francis must have attended this school, as his later career in the army suggests that he was both literate and numerate.

Francis was by trade a blacksmith; and in 1776, aged 22, he enrolled in the 32nd (Cornwall) Regiment of Foot under the name of Francis Robinson. Was the army a means of escaping from something or someone? Was he trying to disguise the fact that he was a Scot in an English regiment? There were other Robinsons in the regiment, including the commanding officer at one time. Whatever the reason, Francis used "Robinson" throughout his army career and also when he married Mary Small in 1781 in Birmingham – as he would have to do, being a serving soldier under that name. However, his two sons were using the name Robbie by the time they returned to Scotland. I thank Frank Robbie and his son, David, who discovered Francis's use of the name Robinson and then did the first research on his army career.

It was not unusual for Scottish soldiers to enlist in regiments which were based a long way from home. Scotland was a favourite recruiting ground and provided many recruits for the British Army. Scots had shown their bravery and fighting abilities in the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, and Highland regiments had distinguished themselves in the colonial wars in India and America in the 1750s and 1760s. Furthermore, the Colonel who headed the Cornwall Regiment was General Sir Ralph Gore, 6th Baronet, recently created 1st Earl of Ross, who hailed from Aberdeenshire and would be keen to recruit troops from his home county.

The Cornwall Regiment had a distinguished history and service record. The first regiment to bear the name was raised in 1695 by Colonel Henry Cornwall as one of eight regiments formed in response to James II's appeal for troops to counter the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion based on his claim to be the rightful Protestant king. In 1702, Colonel Edward Fox raised the 3rd Regiment of Marines, which was disbanded after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 but was reinstated as the 32nd Foot in 1715. In 1751, it had been named the 32nd Regiment of Foot, and in 1782 it became the 32nd (Cornwall) Regiment of Foot.

First army service

In 1775, Britain was drawn into the American War of Independence, and many troops were required. Francis's first period of service with the 32nd Regiment (1776–83) coincided with the American War. According to the ARB notes, Francis enlisted on 25th January 1776; but in the muster book the first date on which his name appears is 12th April 1776, as a private in Captain Edward Edward's Company, with the note: "Recruiting – G. Britain". Because he was literate and numerate, Francis's duties were to recruit men for the regiment in Britain.

In order to determine and record each regiment's strength of officers and men, muster rolls were compiled quarterly and kept in muster books. The place of muster for the Cornwall Regiment from 12th April 1776 to 24th January 1778 was Waterford, Ireland, with Francis

recorded as a "Private - Recruiting". By April 1778, the regiment had moved to Dublin, and Francis was now a "Corporal - Recruiting". By October, the regiment had moved to a camp near Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, and Francis was still recruiting - now mainly in the English Midlands and South Wales. On 26th February 1781, still using the name Robinson, he married Mary Small at St Philip's, the large parish (Anglican) church known today as Birmingham Cathedral. In 1781, Birmingham was a rapidly growing industrial town, with plenty of potential recruits, and Francis would have been busy enrolling troops for the American War.

By April 1781, the regiment had moved to Charles Fort, Co. Cork, with Francis promoted to "Sergeant - Recruiting". On 19th November 1781 (a Monday morning, as the ARB notes correctly record), Francis and Mary's first child, William, was born at "Hartfordwest", South Wales - namely Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, a well-known military town in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a record of a "William Robie" baptised at Aboyne, Aberdeenshire, on 13th October 1782, son of a "Fra' Robbie" (IGI), which could indicate that the family returned to Scotland for William's christening.

By 16th July 1782, the regiment had moved to Cork, and Francis was recorded as "Sergeant - Recruiting, Captain Vesey Knox's Company". At the musters of October 1782 and January 1783, the regiment was at Carlisle Fort, with Francis still a "Sergeant - Recruiting". By April 1783, the regiment was back in Cork; but on 11th April 1783, Francis was discharged from the army. The American War of Independence had ended that year with the Treaty of Versailles, and the Cornwall Regiment had been sent to reinforce Gibraltar after the lifting of the Spanish siege; but Francis's discharge is more likely to have been simply because he had completed the seven years' service for which he had enlisted in 1776. Francis and Mary must have returned to Birmingham to live, because their second child, Isaac Simpson Robbie, was born there on 3rd July 1786. Then came tragedy, as Mary died in Birmingham on 21st October 1786. Francis returned to Aberdeenshire with the two boys - but in 1788 he enrolled again in the army and remarried, and the Birse Kirk Session records from the 1790s suggest that the boys were left in the care of their widowed grandmother, Janet Simpson, while Francis was away on military service for most of the period 1788-96.



Isaac Simpson Robbie and his wife Jean (née Walker)

These Kirk Session records (1789-1801) show, in 1789 at Easter Clune: "Janet Simpson Poor, Mary Robbie, William Robbie, Isaac Simpson Robbie and Peter Mackie". The 1791 record for Easter Clune shows Janet Simpson, Christian Robbie, William Robbie and Isaac Simpson (a child under 7 years). In 1794, there are Janet Simpson, Mary Robbie and Isaac Simpson Robbie; in 1798 Janet Simpson and Christian Robbie; and in 1801 just Janet Simpson. (The identities or relationships of Mary Robbie, Peter Mackie and Christian Robbie are unknown.)

There is also a census record for the parish of Birse in 1792. In this, there is an Isobel Robbie, aged between 40 and 50 years (therefore born about 1742) in Southside of Feugh, with a Janet Simpson, a William Robbie aged about 10 years, and an Isaac Simpson Robbie aged about 10 years. The William Robbie in the Kirk Session records is more likely to be Francis's elder son than his father, leading us to conclude that Janet, shown by her maiden name, was by now a

widow. All this suggests that Janet was raising Francis's two sons while he was serving in the military and living elsewhere with his new wife and family.

Second army service

Francis served again with the 32nd Regiment from 1788–92, a period of relative calm between the American War and the French Wars. He appears in muster records on 24th June 1789 as Corporal Francis Robinson, "A recruit appointed by Lord Ross in Ireland 25 December 1788", which suggests that the Earl of Ross may have personally persuaded Francis to re-enlist. He appears to have spent much of these four years in Ireland, where there was increasing hostility to British rule. He is still recorded as a "Corporal – Recruiting" from 1790–2, but the muster roll for 24th June 1791 mysteriously includes the note: "Ordered to join". The 32nd regiment had gone to Gibraltar in 1783 and did not return to Ireland until 10 years later, so perhaps Francis was trying to recruit Irishmen for the British army. He was based first in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, where he met Elizabeth Moon, who became his second wife on 7th September 1788 at Lifsen Church, Enniskillen. Their first child, a boy, was stillborn prematurely on 11th January 1789. Later that year, on 6th October, Elizabeth gave birth to a daughter, Sarah.

Francis and Elizabeth were then transferred to the garrison at Duncannon Fort, Co. Wexford, built on a strategically important promontory in Waterford Harbour. Their third child, Charles (my 3g-grandfather), was born there – but confusion surrounds the date. A baptism record on 6th August 1791 in Birse suggests that he was born in late 1790 or early 1791 and baptised when his parents returned to Birse on leave. However, the ARB notes clearly record:

Charles Robbie Born at 12 AM Sunday 20th Nov^r 1791 at Duncannon Fort, Ireland.

As the ARB notes have proved to be very reliable where they can be confirmed, it is difficult to challenge this date. Ann probably obtained much of her information from her grandfather Francis, who may well have written it down elsewhere. And 20th November 1791 was indeed a Sunday. However, this date is cast into doubt by J. D. Beckett from Manchester, who has compiled an Army Index of British soldiers and provided the information (from Army Record File WO97/903/81; see www.catalogue.pro.gov.uk) that there was a Charles Robbie of the 80th Foot from Birse discharged from the army in 1825, aged 35. The record actually states:

Charles Robbie Born Birce, Aberdeenshire Served in 80th Foot Regiment; 24th Foot Regiment Discharged aged 35 1809–1825.

Charles obviously did not know that he was born in Ireland. Also, the Birse Old Parochial Register baptismal entry states:

Frd^r. Robbie Easter Clune a son Charles witn. the Congregation 6th August 1791.

In fact, 6th August 1791 was a Saturday, not a Sunday. Church of Scotland baptismal services normally take place during Sunday worship in front of the congregation, so perhaps a mistake was made with the date. The date given in the ARB notes may be explained if Elizabeth had gone into labour on Saturday 20th November 1790 and given birth to Charles around midnight. By the time Francis was informed, it was early Sunday morning, and he may have recorded the date or later remembered it as Sunday 20th, which was then ascribed to 1791. If this theory is correct, the family could indeed have returned to Scotland for the baptism in August 1791.

This is made more credible if we examine the political situation in Ireland at the time. When Francis married Elizabeth Moon in 1788, it was before the outbreak of the French Revolution, which led to the growth of an Irish nationalism that resented what many regarded as a foreign occupation of their country. The "United Irishmen", comprising Catholics and Protestants, were founded in 1791 to secure parliamentary reform and greater religious freedom, though they gradually became more subversive and revolutionary. In this situation, military families

(or at least wives and children) were probably sent home. So, Elizabeth may have returned to Scotland (with or without Francis) with her new baby and had him baptised at Birse.

There are many possibilities; but, in general, greater credibility should be placed on army and parish records than on an entry in a family Bible, especially as the entry was probably made several years after the event. Ann Robbie's Bible notes are an extremely valuable source of information on our family; but a retrospective entry based on someone's memory is more likely than an official record to contain an error. Although certainty is impossible, for my records my 3g-grandfather Charles was born at midnight on Saturday 20th November 1790 at Duncannon Fort, Ireland, and baptised at Birse, Aberdeenshire, on Saturday 6th August 1791, until new evidence convinces me otherwise.

On 25th April 1792, having returned to England, Francis applied for a discharge from the army for unknown reasons, and this was granted. Francis was discharged on 24th June 1792, having served for three years and six months, that is, only half of what may have been a seven-year enlistment. On 6th February 1794, though we are not certain of the location, Elizabeth gave birth to their fourth child, James, who unfortunately died on 11th March.

Third army service

In 1793, Britain found itself at war with revolutionary France, and Francis enlisted in the 32nd Regiment, now back from Gibraltar, for a third period of service. He appears on a muster roll for 24th June 1793 under the heading "Names of the Party & Recruits Before Muster", which suggests that he had applied for re-enlistment. According to the same records, Francis was enrolled as a corporal on 1st July 1794. He is recorded as a sergeant again on 24th December 1794 and also in the musters of 24th June 1795, 24th December 1795 and 24th June 1796, by which time he was on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, which Ann Robbie in her Bible notes calls "St Dominico". The French colony in the western third of the island was known as St Domingue (present-day Haiti), while the Spanish part (the eastern two-thirds) was called Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic)

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 had brought crisis to St Domingue, at that time the world's richest colony due to its lucrative sugar trade. Law and order had collapsed, and in August 1791 thousands of black slaves had risen in a huge revolt which laid waste to scores of plantations. The aristocratic French planters and the local assemblies invited the British to take control, hoping that the British would suppress the slave revolt, restore the monarchy in France and protect their commercial interests. In 1794, Britain, which had declared war on republican France in 1793, sent a small expeditionary force from Jamaica to St Domingue.

At least 14 regiments were raised in the 1790s in St Domingue by the British, whose early intervention went well until their forces began to suffer heavy casualties from malaria, yellow fever and ambushes. The desperate need to recruit more troops may be why Francis Robbie was sent to help recruit and organise the European mercenaries, French colonists and freed slaves into efficient fighting units. By 1796, the majority of the troops fighting for Britain, and the most successful, were companies of black "chasseurs" – slaves drafted from the plantations and promised their freedom after five years' service. They were paid and fed as British soldiers and were allowed prize money the same as white troops. These black soldiers were much more efficient and economical than British soldiers. They did not have to be transported and were much less vulnerable to sickness and desertion.

Francis had probably been recruiting troops in Britain for two years after re-enlisting – but in 1795 the 32nd Regiment was sent to the West Indies, where the British were seeking to capture valuable French-controlled islands. For British soldiers, this posting was considered the worst possible – virtually a death sentence because of the disease and oppressive weather conditions.

In August 1795, the 32nd Regiment reached Cork from England after suffering severe storms and shipwrecks. After further problems, the regiment was about 950 strong when it set sail in November, straight into another storm which scattered the fleet and drowned a third of the men. They embarked again in December 1795 and made at least one more abortive attempt to sail before finally getting away in late February 1796. By now, the men had been on board ship for more than two months and still had a voyage of six weeks ahead of them. When they reached Barbados in April, more than 70 were sick or dying and had to be left there. About 580 officers and men arrived at Mole St Nicholas in north-east St Domingue in May 1796, the beginning of the fever season. Detachments were sent immediately to take the nearby fort at Bombarde, suffering all manner of deprivations over the next months. By December, over 200 had died, most succumbing to sickness rather than military action.

Francis took with him his wife Elizabeth and daughter Sarah (and possibly Charles), which suggests that he did not go there in a fighting capacity. There may have been a small British settlement in St Domingue (at the "Cape Clamal" in the ARB notes?), and perhaps Francis's family went there. But the colony was hardly the place for women and children. It was not just the troops who succumbed to the fevers; Francis's wife and daughter were among the victims. Sarah died aged six, on 8th April 1796, and her mother soon followed on 29th July. These must have been terrible blows to Francis. But he himself was one of the lucky ones, as only 150 officers and men from the Cornwall Regiment came back alive from the West Indies.

Clearly, one of the main priorities in St Domingue by this time was not recruiting but caring for the sick and dying. The record for 24th June 1796 has Sergeant Francis Robinson with the note: "Transferred to Hosp. Corp[?] 24 Feb", while the muster books and pay lists of the St Domingo Hospital Corps at Port-au-Prince for the year from 25th December 1795 record him as a "Serjeant" "from 24th Febr". However, Francis is next recorded on 25th April 1798 as a private in the 67th (South Hampshire) Regiment of Foot with the note: "[from] Hosp. Corp.". His transfer and reduction in rank must have been due to ill-health. Conditions had taken their toll on him; and the 32nd Regiment had gone to the Bahamas by this time. Francis is recorded again as a private in the 67th Regiment between 25th June and 24th July 1798 (pay 16s 3d) and between 25th July and 24th August 1798 (pay 16s 9½d), then with the note: "Gone to Europe". So, Francis must have left St Domingue some time after August 1798 and returned to Britain, while the rest of the 67th Regiment went to Jamaica.

He was officially discharged from the 67th Regiment in November 1798; and the reasons and his service are shown in the following "Extract of Certificate of Discharge" at Chatham:

His Majesty's 67th Regiment of (Foot), whereof General E. M. Browne is Colonel.

These are to certify that the Bearer hereof, Francis Robinson Private in the aforesaid Regiment, born in the Parish of Birse in or near the Market Town of Aberdeen in the County of Aberdeen aged 49 years and by Trade a Blacksmith hath served honestly and faithfully in the said regiment Eight months, in the Royal Hospital Corps 2 years 2 months, in the 32nd Regiment 22 years & 2 months. Total Service 25 years.

But being Sickly & Unfit for Service is hereby discharged, and humbly recommended as a proper Object of his Majesty's Royal Bounty of CHELSEA HOSPITAL. He having first received all just Demands of Pay, Cloathing [sic], &c. from his Entry into the said Regiment to the Date of his Discharge; as appears by his Receipt on the Back hereof.

Given under my Hand, and the Seal of the Regiment, at this third day of November 1798

E. Maxwell Brown

The details in this document raise some questions. First, it gives Francis's age as 49; but the ARB notes give his date of birth as 30th September 1753, which would make his age 45 years

and 2 months at discharge. Second, while his periods of service in the Royal Hospital Corps and in the 67th Regiment appear to be correct, the time stated as served in the 32nd Regiment appears excessive. Both the ARB notes and the pay and muster records suggest that he first enlisted in 1776, probably in January. His three periods of service with the 32nd Regiment appear to be 7 years, 3 years 6 months and 2 years respectively, which add up to only 12 years 6 months, making a grand total of all military service of 15 years 4 months.

Francis's army service, however, appears to be confirmed by his official record at the Public Record Office, which states:

Francis Robinson Born Birss, Aberdeenshire Served in 32nd Foot Regiment, 67th Foot Regiment, Royal Hospital Corps Discharged aged 49 after 25 years service, date 1798.

If this is true, then he must have enlisted in 1773 and served continuously until 1798. Are there some periods of service that we do not know about? It is interesting to note that these army records usually give the whole period of service: for example, his son Charles's service is recorded as 1809–25, but for Francis the only date given is 1798. A possible explanation is that Francis's colonel-in-chief, Edward Maxwell Brown, may have "credited" him extra years of service because he wanted to ensure that Francis received an army pension. In the 18th century, soldiers received pensions not as a right but as a grace or bounty from the Crown. There were some general rules as to who was eligible. A soldier could qualify for an army pension if he had served for 20 years or more, *or* had been maimed in his service or by his musket exploding in training, *or* had his health impaired by service in parts of the world with extremes of climate, *and* had a letter of recommendation from his commanding officer. Francis was probably well regarded and had clearly suffered hardships and tragedies in St Domingue, and so his colonel probably felt that a pension was well deserved.

Francis's illness was clearly sufficient to warrant his discharge on health grounds. After his return to Britain, he may have spent time recovering at the Chelsea Royal Hospital (founded in 1682), as he continued to appear on the muster rolls and pay lists of the 67th Regiment until May 1800, which suggests that he was still receiving his army pay. From 25th August to 24th December 1799, he was "On furlow" – that is, on leave of absence from the regiment. The entry for 25th April to 24th May 1800 states: "On Furlow, Struck off the Strength". Some later family records refer to Francis as a Chelsea Pensioner; but this probably means that he was in receipt of an army pension rather than a resident of the Royal Hospital. So now, Francis would have a small regular income which would help him settle back into civilian life. He obviously recovered well from his illness, because he lived to a ripe old age.

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David J. Robbie

Part 2, covering Francis Robbie's third marriage and his descendants, will appear in Journal No. 93 (November 2004).

Black's is Back!

On page 38 of your Publications List (Feb 2004), we had to say that *GS350, Surnames of Scotland, G F Black* was temporarily unavailable. It's back in stock, and the price is now £25, which is modest for a wonderful source of reference – hardback, beautifully bound, 838 pages. It weighs 1600 gm (1.6 kg, yes), so the postage is another fortune – so *order it now* for Christmas, and we'll send it double-bubble-wrapped by surface mail. Forget the socks, the pinnies that you accept with smiles through gritted teeth – you really, really want Black's, the history of the occurrence and distribution of Scottish surnames.

Piries of Cairnie

After I had done a substantial amount of research on my own family, I decided to tackle my husband George's side. At the time, I didn't realise just what a big job I was taking on. After George had supplied quite a lot of information, we decided to ask his mother's sister if she had any old photos of relatives. To our surprise, an envelope arrived with about two dozen very old brown and yellowed photographs of both sides of their family.

This photograph shows three generations of the Pirie family of Moss Side, Cairnie, all named William. This was taken shortly before the eldest William's death in 1928 "aged 86 years". He was my husband's great-great-grandfather, born in 1839 at Tulloch, Cairnie. Notice that the dates don't tally – after all, who knows?

He married Jane Young (born in 1847 at New Mill of Keith) at Cairnie Church in 1865. They had 13 children: Jessie (George's great-grandmother, born in 1866), William (1868), Jane (1869), Margaret Ann (1872), Adam Alexander (1874), James Cruickshank (1877), Betsy (1879), Barbara McWilliam (1880), twins Robert and Agnes L. (1883), Magdalene (1887), and last but not least Sophia Dingwall (1893).

The picture of William and Jane was taken on the occasion of their golden wedding in December 1915. My husband's aunt Betsy from Kildrummy, granddaughter of Jessie Pirie, told of how Jane had one day been out helping at the thrashing mill with her husband William. Jane had forked a whole ruck of sheaves to William, who was feeding the mill.



Feeling unwell, she went into the house and told her daughter Magdalene that she would take her tablets and lie down in the box bed in the kitchen. After a short while, she got up and told Magdalene that she didn't think the tablets were going to work this time, and to look after "the auld man", as she put it. She collapsed and died suddenly of a heart attack, aged 70 years.

It's great to hear some of the old family stories. No one would have thought to pass this particular story on if I hadn't been asking about the old folks. All would have been lost. They certainly were a hardy breed of people back then.

I would love to hear from anyone with connections to Cairnie or the Piries.

Heather Mitchell No. 10642

Francis Robbie of Birse (1753–1839)

Part 2

We do not know whether his son, Charles, was with him in the West Indies; but, after his discharge in 1798, Francis returned to Scotland, to the Birse area, where he was reunited with his sons from his first marriage, William and Isaac, and returned to his old life as a farmer and blacksmith. Within three years, he was married for a third time, this time to Isabella Simpson (born about 1767) on 10th November 1801 at Aboyne. We can assume that he took a tenancy on a farm called Dillachaan, near Finzean in the parish of Birse, because that is where their three children were born – Archibald on 24th August 1802, Francis on 31st March 1804 and Barbara on 28th August 1809. By this time, his oldest sons were grown up, William being 28 and Isaac 23. In this same year, 1809, Charles, now aged 19, joined the British army.

Francis and Isabella later moved to Inchloan in Durris, Kincardineshire. Francis must have been over 60 years of age by this time and may have been able to live on his army pension. Perhaps he took on the tenancy of a smaller farm. Whatever the case, the couple remained at Inchloan. Isabella died there on Friday morning, 24th February 1832, aged 66, and Francis died on Saturday 11th May 1839 “aged 87 years and nearly six months”, according to Ann Robbie’s Bible notes (“the ARB notes”). These give his date of birth as 30th September 1753, which, if correct, would actually make him 85 years and nearly eight months when he died.

Francis’s children and grandchildren

Francis was the father of nine known children, six of whom had descendants who now live all over the world and make up a good proportion of the worldwide Robbie community. By his first wife, Mary Small, Francis had two sons. William was born on 19th November 1781 at Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, South Wales. We know little about him; but army records show a William Robbie, born at Birse, Aberdeenshire, who served in the 92nd (Highland) Regiment of Foot and the Princess of Wales Fencibles between 1800 and 1831, when he was discharged aged 49. The dates and age fit but the place of birth does not, although William may have been unaware of his true birthplace.

William died in Edinburgh on 11th February 1858 aged 76, and appears to have been married twice – first to Ann McGrigor at Forres, Moray, on 17th October 1807, and then to Amelia McLardie in Edinburgh on 21st July 1840. His first marriage bore three children – Francis (about 1808), James Grant (about 1809) and Christian (1814). There is an army record at the PRO (file WO97/1012/77) of a James Grant Robbie, born at Forres, who served in the 92nd Foot Regiment from 1824–48, discharged aged 39. This is the same regiment in which his father had served. It was first raised as the Gordon Highlanders in 1794 by the 4th Duke of Gordon, whose wife, the beautiful Duchess Jean, is reputed to have promised a kiss to all recruits who “took the shilling”. In 1798, it became the 92nd (Highland) Regiment of Foot.

Francis and Mary’s second son was Isaac, born on 3rd July 1786 in Birmingham. He assumed the middle name of Simpson, probably from his grandmother, Janet Simpson, who seems to have brought him up while his father was away serving in the army. There are two records of his marriage to Jean (or Jane) Walker – at Aboyne on 31st May 1812 (probably the calling of the marriage banns), and at Birse on 20th June 1812. Isaac and Jean had 10 children: Isaac (1813), Francis (1815), Christina or Christian (1817), Charles (1819), Jean or Jane (1821), William Frederick (1822), Margaret (1825), George (1827), John (1829) and James (1832). Isaac senior was recorded as a master boot and shoe maker at Clentor in 1813 and at Back Ennochie, Birse in 1841. In 1861, he was recorded as a farmer with seven acres, and in 1871 with five acres at Back Ennochie, where he died on 11th August 1879 aged 93.

One of Isaac and Jean’s 10 children could be the Sergeant Francis Robbie of the 1st Battalion Scots Fusilier Guards who was killed on 20th September 1854 at the Battle of the Alma, as

recorded on the Crimean War Roll of Honour. His brother, William Frederick, was another adventurous Robbie, whose story is told on the Robbie Genealogy website. Having saved £100 as an apprentice shoemaker and odd-job man, he joined the 1849 gold rush to California and was quite successful there, but was cheated out of a claim so went to join the gold rush to Australia. He was successful in his prospecting and in a gamble on a lottery which won him much of the best land in Ballarat. He became rich and sent money home to relatives in Birse, but lived very simply and never married. When he died in Ballarat in 1913 at the age of 91, he bequeathed £30,000 to Aberdeen University and £650 to relatives in Birse. When told by the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* of his brother's death and £30,000 bequest, the 85-year-old John, who lived at Boghead, Finzean, is reported to have said: "The thing's nae botherin' me an' I've the finest milking coo in Finzean, an' wi' my state pension, I'm quite happy and contented".

One website gives a third son for Francis Robbie and Mary Small – namely Donald, born in 1784 in Aboyne, who died on 25th October 1807 in Banchory-Ternan, Kincardineshire. This could tie in with the 1782 baptismal record referred to in "First army service" (see Part 1), which, if it is William's, could suggest that Mary was living in Aboyne while Francis was away in the army. However, Donald does not appear in the ARB notes, which have been very reliable in details of children.

After Mary Small's death, Francis married Elizabeth Moon in 1788 in Enniskillen. They had four children, only one of whom (Charles, my 3g-grandfather) survived into adulthood, as detailed in Part 1. Charles was born in 1790 or 1791 at Duncannon Fort, Co. Wexford, where Francis was stationed at the time, and was probably baptised at Birse on 6th August 1791. We know little of Charles's childhood, but it appears that he accompanied his parents while Francis was an army recruiting officer. Charles may have travelled to St Domingue in the mid-1790s and survived the fevers that claimed his mother and sister. If so, then the experience did not deter him from army service, as he enlisted in His Majesty's 24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot on 28th January 1809 at the age of 18. His father had connections with Warwickshire, having served in the Birmingham area from 1776–81 and married Mary Small there in 1781; but Charles himself had no connections with the area.

We do not know what active service Charles saw; but, after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, he returned to Scotland and married Rebecca Morrice on 21st July 1816 at the Manse of Durris. On 22nd September 1816, he left the 24th Regiment, and on 26th September he joined, or was transferred to, the 80th (Staffordshire Volunteers) Regiment of Foot. The reasons behind this are not known. Charles was later stationed at Rochdale, Lancashire, where his son John was born in 1818. John also had a military career, serving in the 71st (Highland) Regiment of Foot from 1836–48, when he was discharged aged 29.

Charles remained in the Staffordshire Volunteers until 1825, serving out his career on the Mediterranean island of Malta, where they had been sent in 1821. Charles and Rebecca's second son (also Charles) was born in 1824 in Malta, where he was discharged from the army on 31st May 1825 with an "aneurism of the left sub clavical [*sic*] artery". It may have been an old wound sustained during war service, or the result of an accident. The family returned to Scotland, and on 21st February 1830 a third child, Mary Ann, was born in Aberdeen (Old Machar). Charles's wound did not prevent him from working as a labourer; but he died before his father Francis, of consumption at the age of 42, in April 1833 in Aberdeen.

Francis Robbie and his third wife, Isabella Simpson, had their three children at Dillachaan by Finzean, Birse, as mentioned above. Archibald (born in 1802) married Mary George (born about 1804 at Banchory) on 29th March 1829 at Inchloan, Durris, to where the Robbie family had by this time moved. Archibald and Mary had 11 children: Ann (1825–1915), who wrote the Bible notes, Isabella (1829), Mary (1831), Francis (1832), Archibald (1834), Barbara (1836), Christina (1839), a stillborn daughter (1841), Jean (1842), Amelia (1844) and William

(1848). Probably in 1851, the family emigrated to Canada, settling in Ontario. Both Mary and Archibald Robbie died at Holstein, Grey County, Ontario – Archibald on 4th March 1869, aged 66, and Mary on 20th October 1882, aged 78.

Francis and Isabella's second child, Francis (II), was born in 1804 and died on 16th January 1849 at Knappach, Banchory, aged 44. (He may have been married twice, and had one known child, Francis III, born on 15th June 1841.) Their third child, Barbara (born 1809), died on 13th February 1858, aged 48, at Upper Lochton, Banchory. She married Alexander Carnie on 22nd November 1839 at Banchory, and they had Mary Ann (1849?) and John H. Carnie (1852?).

Francis's descendants

Francis had seven known sons, two daughters and at least 30 grandchildren. I have records of 52 great-grandchildren, 98 2g-grandchildren, 54 3g-grandchildren, 53 4g-grandchildren, 49 5g-grandchildren and 25 6g-grandchildren – in all, at least 370 known descendants, with many more still to be traced.

During the 19th century, some of them gradually moved south to other parts of Scotland and to England and beyond. My 3g-grandfather, Charles, followed his father into an army career then settled in Aberdeen, where he died in 1833. His middle child, Charles (II), married Marion Barker in 1848 in Edinburgh, then settled in Glasgow, where he worked in the textile and leather trades. Some of their nine children remained in Glasgow, where their descendants still live. Charles and Marion's eldest son, Charles (III), my great-grandfather, worked as a confectioner and then a hardware merchant and chandler in Glasgow. He appears in the 1901 census in a hotel in Lambeth, London, with his wife Margaret Haddow and a daughter. My grandfather, Alexander (Francis's 2g-grandson), moved south to Blyth, Northumberland, in about 1902 to establish a confectionery works in partnership with two men called Redhead and Marshall. Their products included the popular mint sweets known as "Black Bullets". Alexander's family later spread to Bristol, London, Buckinghamshire and Staffordshire.

Another 2g-grandson of Francis, David Middleton Robbie, left Perthshire in the 1930s to play football for Bury Town FC (and on one recorded occasion for Manchester United). He was joined by his brother, Robert Laird Robbie, whose son Frank did much of the early research into Francis's life and is among the Robbie descendants who have remained in Lancashire.

Several of Francis's descendants inherited his adventurous spirit and emigrated to Canada, the USA, Australia or New Zealand. The earliest was Archibald (1802–69), who, as mentioned above, emigrated from Kincardineshire to Canada with his wife Mary, their six surviving children, their son-in-law Alexander Coutts (1821–75), husband of Ann, and their infant sons James and Alexander. Alexander Coutts Snr was a "tollie", a tollhouse-keeper, at Drumoak on the Old Deeside Road, 14 miles west of Aberdeen. We know that the Coutts family arrived in Canada on 2nd October 1851. They settled in Ontario, where they had nine more children. Two sons, Edward and Isaac, later moved to Saskatchewan; and their descendants spread to Alberta and British Columbia.

My full analysis of the Ellis Island records shows 61 Robbies entering the USA between 1894 and 1924, several of them descendants of Francis. On 15th February 1910, two cousins, both 2g-grandsons of Francis, arrived on the *California* – my grandfather's brother James, and Alexander Barker Robbie, son of Alexander Lyon Robbie and Mary Blackie of Paisley. They were followed on 24th July 1910, also on the *California*, by another 2g-grandson, John Davidson Robbie, son of Isaac Robbie and Margaret Davidson of Bellshill. Alexander went to Yonkers, New York, and James to Detroit, while John settled in Pittsburgh. Alexander merits a separate article: he returned to Scotland three times between 1911 and 1920 before settling in Yonkers with his wife and three children. He was joined in New York by his brothers David, a wood blocker, in 1913 on the *California*, and Bertram, a smithy assistant, on the

Assyria in 1922, and by their sister Elspeth Kelvin Robbie, a mill worker, on the *Columbia* in 1923. So there was quite a colony of Robbies in New York, but not many left in Paisley.

James Robbie went to Detroit, where his brother Charles (IV) already lived; but James later returned to Scotland, where in 1917 he married Martha Nicholson. John Robbie later moved from Pittsburgh to Newark, Ohio, and was joined in 1912 by his brother William Alexander. William's grandson, Mark, a dedicated family-history researcher, is my main US contact.

As well as Francis's grandson, William Frederick, other descendants emigrated to Australia. Isaac Simpson Robbie's daughter, Jean, married Thomas Tevendale in 1843 at Strachan, Kincardineshire. Their son Thomas (1844–1903) left Birse in the early 1870s with his wife Ann Coutts, moving to Glasgow and later Motherwell, where Thomas carried out his trade of master shoemaker. Their eldest, Mary (Francis's 2g-granddaughter), married James Thomson Chambers in Motherwell in 1898. James emigrated in 1911 to Sydney, where he was joined six months later by Mary and their sons William and Thomas, and by Mary's sister Christian McWhinnie and her children Thomas and Anne. The Chambers family lived for eight or nine years in Roseville, Sydney, which was then still an orchard and market-garden area. James, an architect and builder, began to design and build the high-class enclave that Roseville has become. The family moved around New South Wales, and both sons joined their father in the building industry. William later became Manual Arts master at one of Sydney's top private schools, while Thomas remained in the timber industry for some years before becoming a farmer and grazier at Blayney, NSW. Thomas's daughter, Heather Saunders (Francis's 4g-granddaughter), is writing a book on the architectural works of her grandfather.

New Zealand was another destination for Robbie emigrants. James Barker Robbie, brother of my great-grandfather Charles, emigrated around 1875 to New Plymouth, where he was joined by his sister Marion before she moved on to Australia in about 1888. (She never married, and died of hepatitis in Melbourne in 1903, aged only 39 years.) James had married Harriet Edith Moyses (born in London in 1849) in Auckland in 1876. They had three sons, Charles Edward (born 1879), Alexander Bertram (1881–1951) and David Barker (1883–1950), who all served in the Boer War, and four daughters.

A different Marion, daughter of Charles Robbie and Margaret Haddow, and 2g-granddaughter of Francis, married James Martin, a painter and signwriter, in the Gorbals, Glasgow, in 1898. Having tried to settle in the USA, the childless couple then emigrated to New Zealand around 1911. They had tried unsuccessfully to persuade a number of relatives to let them take one of their children with them, but were later joined by a niece, Margaret Haddow Robbie, who was probably the daughter of James Robbie and Martha Nicholson of Glasgow. They settled in Dunedin, where they were obviously successful – because when Marion died in 1939 aged 62 (James had died 10 years earlier), she left money and property to the value of several hundred pounds, including a fur coat, a fur cape, a black handbag with brass fastenings and a wireless set. Margaret, who was living in Dunedin in 1939, was left £400 provided that "she survives me unmarried or shall have married during my lifetime in a Protestant Church to one born and brought up a Protestant". We are still trying to discover the outcome of that provision.

There must be many more descendants of Francis Robbie around the world of whom we know nothing yet. Most may be unaware of Francis's existence, let alone his North-East origins and his extraordinary life. Perhaps one day we shall discover them and make them aware of him.

Francis in retrospect

Francis Robbie was hardly a man of his times. He was born into a society in which life moved slowly and followed a predictable cycle, dictated to a large degree by the seasons and the tasks of the farming year. For most lads of Birse, a good but basic education in the village school was followed by work on their fathers' farms or in their trades. A marriage to a local girl was

usually followed by children and increased pressures to work hard on the land or at a trade to feed and clothe them. And, up to the age of 22, Francis was following this pattern in the restricted and closed world of the Highland Scottish farm and village.

Yet Francis was able to break away when he enlisted in 1776 in the army, which offered one of the few ways out of this regular cycle of life in rural Scotland. Perhaps his intelligence and education had opened his eyes to the world beyond Aberdeenshire. Perhaps he was lured by the promises of travel and adventure that an army career seemed to promise. On enlisting, he was not to know what experiences, hardships and tragedies lay before him. In 1753, the year of his birth, the first wheeled cart made its appearance in Birse. In his army career, Francis no doubt travelled thousands of miles in wagons and coaches through Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland and in sailing ships beyond our shores. The limit of his travel was not Aberdeen but Port-au-Prince. By the time of his death in 1839, the steam railway, and soon the steamship, were the means of transport of the future. Instead of marrying a local farmer's daughter, Francis had three wives – one English, one Irish and one Scottish. Two of them died tragically young.

Yet having experienced the wider world, Francis returned at the end of his army service to the slower, more predictable world of rural Scotland, where he lived out his long life in apparent contentment. Most of Francis's descendants in the world today seem to be descended through one son by each of his three marriages – Isaac Simpson Robbie (by Mary Small), Charles Robbie (by Elizabeth Moon) and Archibald Robbie (by Isabella Simpson). When we consider the risks, dangers and privations that Francis survived, some of these descendants can count themselves fortunate to exist at all. And we are all extremely fortunate to be able to claim Francis as our esteemed ancestor.

Sources

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Ann Robbie's Bible notes ("the ARB notes"), by kind permission of Cecil C. Couetts.
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I have also consulted many Internet websites on the subjects of regiments, army recruitment and campaigns, clans, histories and much else. Sharon Jameson, an Australian with roots in Birse, has compiled the excellent website <http://www.geocities.com/sharemslie/> on Birse. It includes the 1841 census for Birse, birth/marriage/death records and monumental inscriptions.

A Calder Story

As a young child in Manchester, I knew nothing about my Calder ancestors until, as I got older, my mother let us look through her treasures. I remember reading documents about someone in Scotland who had left her some money around 1918. Money had been left to help improve the water supply in Aberdeen in 1896, and someone later went to court and proved it had not been used, so it was divided up. I thought no more about these papers until, in my teens, my cousin and I visited Aberdeen in 1946, long after my mother had died. Noticing that many houses had the family name on the door, we walked around looking for Calders and found an awful lot.

Time passed on, and I only became interested in finding out more after I was given a copy of a page from the family Bible about my mother's immediate family, and found my grandmother had come from Aberdeen. I sent for her Old Parish Register birth entry, which led to finding several great-aunts and uncles listed together in the OPR. My great-grandparents, Charles Calder and Isabella Low, were married on 31st August 1828 in Aberdeen. Their children, all baptised in St Nicholas Church, were Charles Fraser Calder (born in 1832), James Calder (1835), Isabella Calder (1836), Agnes Low Calder (1839), George Low Calder (1841), William Duncan Calder (1842), Janet Duncan Calder (1844), my grandmother Mary Elizabeth Calder (1847), and Charlotte Jane Calder (1849), although I only found seven of the nine children.

I knew something about the will, so I sent for a copy and it made very interesting reading; but it was not the paper that my mother had let us read. Four years ago, we viewed some other materials courtesy of the National Archives of Scotland, then visited the ANESFHS shop in Aberdeen and found where my great-grandfather had had his business on The Green. Before going home, we were browsing in a shop when I found some prints of The Green. If we had not visited King Street first, these would have meant nothing to us. We later visited Allenvale Cemetery hoping to find the gravestones of some relatives, but without luck. It fascinated me that most of the graves had the occupants' trades listed, and I remarked that there were a lot of Spirit Merchants there. You can imagine the laugh we had.

I put a message on Teletext inquiring into my Yorkshire connections, and a lady replied with some information giving the eldest two great-uncles named above, which now made a family of nine children. Another lady answered my son's query on the Friends Reunited website, giving him a list of names of people in my mother's family. I contacted her, and she turned out to be a granddaughter of my cousin, able to fill in a lot of dates I did not have.

My grandmother, Mary Elizabeth, married William Hall, who came from Leeds, on 27th May 1868 in Aberdeen. They had 12 children, most of whom died very young: William (1869-90), George Calder (1870-1), Charles William (1871-96), Agnes (1873-1903), Thomas Blenkhorn (1875-1932), Mary (1877-97), Isabella (1879-86), John Octavious (1881-6), Emma (1883-6), Henry (b. 1884), my mother Dora (1888-1938), and Evelyn (1890-1976). The three eldest were born in Aberdeen, and the family ended up in Manchester, where my siblings and I were born. In 1886 in Manchester, three of the children died of scarlet fever within four days.

My mother had a very sad life after her parents died six months apart when she was 11 and her youngest sister was nine. My grandfather died on 28th October 1899 at 47 Cheetham Street in north Manchester, and my grandmother died on 6th May 1900. I hope this article will turn up more information.

Agnes Humphreys No. 11400

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