

Focus of This Series of Newsletters

I worry that all the time researching my ancestral lines, including the Nisbet family, will all go to waste unless what I've learned is shared with others. So that is my sole objective with this newsletter: sharing.

The focal family of my research is the one formed by the marriage of James Nisbet and Helen Nicol in 1796 in Kirkcaldy, Scotland. These were my great-great-great-grandparents. In 1801 they moved with their two young children to Kirkcudbright on the southwest coast of Scotland and there raised 11 more children, all of whom lived to maturity. I have found the story of this family, and their descendants, to be intriguing and enlightening – and hope others will find the same.

The Search for Nisbet Descendants

In seeking out people who share my Nisbet ancestry, I have combed through information in my own archives, and online at sites like Ancestry, FamilySearch, and various people-finding sites. My goal has been to locate all those of my same generation of "Kirkcudbright Nisbets," which I have labeled "The 6th Generation." At this point, I think I have identified most of the 6th Gen and we number over 80 individuals. Not all are living, and those that are range in age from their 40s to their 80s – that being due to the variations in birth order and the length of childbearing age during the 200 intervening years. Many, if not most, have children and grandchildren of their own, so the 7th and 8th generations are well on their way.

I have thoroughly enjoyed meeting the cousins I have been able to personally reach. Numbering nearly twenty, all have been generous with their time and have taken a genuine interest in this project. Many have related interesting stories about their own lives as well as their ancestors and I appreciate their trust and openness. Such discussions are the roots of success in genealogy.

You can help with the search! Please forward my contact info to family members and invite them to learn about their ancestors.

A Little Bit About Me

Growing up, I never liked the name Nisbet as a middle name and felt burdened by it. Later in life I came to understand the history behind the name and why my father felt it important to keep it in the family.

My father was William Nisbet Ross, his name being given to him in honor of his father's grandfather William Nisbet and an uncle who had the same name. He was raised on the East Coast and went to Brown University



during WWII, serving in the Army Air Corps towards the end. He later became a nuclear engineer and had a long career at the National Laboratory in Livermore, CA where I was raised with two younger brothers and an older sister. Dad took up genealogy seriously when he retired in 1986 and this continued right up to his death in 2000.

After I retired from a career in high-tech manufacturing a few years ago, I picked up where my dad left off and have been chasing data and learning family history since then. Besides Nisbet, I also research the Ross line, and the Wiley and Healy names on my mom's side. It is a part time hobby that I mix in with innumerable home-improvement and family activities.

I live in the "wine country" north of San Francisco and enjoy it despite wildfires, floods and earthquakes. My wife Jody is from Wisconsin, and we have an old family cottage out there where we spend each July. Between us we have four kids and four granddaughters. One of my sons has already said he will pick up the genealogy banner when I go.

CALL FOR PHOTOS!

I am a sponge for all things Nisbet and would be very thankful for any old family photos you could share. I have a digital archive as well as a special dedicated archival "closet" where I store originals in acid-free folders and monitor humidity. I also have a reproduction set-up so I can copy originals and send them back to you.

The Nisbet Family of Kirkcudbright

James Nisbet (1772-1834) was the patriarch of the family. His birth and death dates in parentheses are important as there were earlier and later Jameses in our lineage. James' birthdate is recorded in a number of family documents as Christmas Day, 1772, but no official record of the birth has been found. It is presumed he was born in or around the town of Haddington, but that is an assumption based on a note his son wrote a hundred years later. William wrote this about James in his 1886 autobiography:

"His father was a native of Haddingtonshire and died in the town of Haddington at a very advanced age, in which place he taught a school."

According to a notation by William in his bible, James's father was also named James and this conforms to the Scottish naming conventions of that era. Some research places James Sr. as a child of a William Nisbet and Alison Hepburn who lived in the region in the early 1700s, but that is tenuous at best and bears further investigation.

A Research Note

In 2015 my wife and I paid a brief visit to the archives at Haddington which are quite impressive. We were escorted into a climate-controlled vault line with shelves containing documents from the town council and other local business dating back centuries. Unfortunately, we only had two hours for this stop and could not really dig in, but a cursory survey of town council minutes from the mid- 1700's showed quite a number of references to persons named Nisbet, including several James. A return visit has been postponed two years due to the pandemic but we are scheduled to revisit Haddington in 2022.

Back To the Story

Little has been uncovered about James' youth, but it is clear that he was trained as a gardener, a profession "in which he attained great proficiency," as William wrote. And that is the profession he undoubtedly held when he wed Helen Nicol on Sept. 16, 1796 at Abbotshall Parish Church near her home at Kirkcaldy, on the east coast, north of Edinburgh.



Abbotshall, Kirkcaldy, where the Nisbets were married in 1796

Helen Nicol

Helen was the youngest of 12 children, born to John Nicol and Margaret Welsh on May 6, 1778. The family was then living in Haddingtonshire (now East Lothian), the same region referred to as James' possible birthplace in William's writing. This provides a clue that the families of James and Helen may have been acquainted at an early age.

At the time of his death in 1794, Helen's father was employed as chief gardener at the Raith House estate just west of Kirkcaldy, and James may have worked for him there.



Raith had been established in 1694 by the then Lord Raith, Alexander Melville. It had received extensive remodeling in 1785 by noted architect James Playfair and was at its height during John Nicol's tenure. As with most Scottish estates, great pride was taken in cultivating extensive gardens, many of which included specimens imported from around the world. A successful gardener such as John became knowledgeable in botany, horticulture, genetics and even geography.

The Nicol family has a well-documented genealogy connecting back through Sir George Warrender (1658-1722) 1st Baronet of Lochend in Haddingtonshire. Among Helen's siblings, an older brother Walter Nicol (1769-1811) achieved some renown as a garden and hothouse designer who also wrote several books on practical horticulture. Given her father's and brother's vocations, it is no wonder that Helen's husband was also a young gardener, and someone she may have known from her youth in Haddingtonshire.

The Early Years of the Nisbet Family

Following their wedding in 1796, James and Helen may have stayed in the Kirkcaldy area for the first year. In November 1797, they arrived at the parish of Lochgoilhead & Kilmorich about 30 miles northwest of Glasgow where James had secured a gardener position at the Ardkinglas estate in Cairndow. By this time, Helen was expecting their first child, a son they named James, born April 25, 1798 and duly baptized 4 days later.

Ardkinglas was originally a castle built in the 14th century by the Campbells. The castle was in ruins by 1795 when a new house was built by Sir Alexander Campbell. It has been characterized as a "rather dull classical house" and

was destroyed by fire in 1831. In 1907, the current mansion was built, but some of today's gardens and grounds may be the very same that young James Nisbet tended.



Above are the old stables converted to principal residence after the fire of 1831. Replaced in 1907.

While James tended the lord's gardens, Helen took on all the homemaking responsibilities of a Georgian-era wife with a young child - preparing meals, needlework, laundry and housekeeping. On January 18, 1801, she gave birth to a second son they named John in honor of Helen's father.

TRADITIONAL SCOTTISH NAMING CONVENTIONS

Although there were exceptions, James and Helen appear to have followed the local norms of the time when naming their children:

- first son: named for father's father
- second son: named for mother's father
- third son: named for father (already taken in the case of James since this was the name of the first son)
- first daughter: named for mother's mother
- second daughter named for father's mother
- third daughter named for mother

On to St. Mary's Isle

After four years at Ardkinglas, James secured a new position as gardener, and later forester and land steward, for the Earl of Selkirk at his estate on St. Mary's Isle, just outside the village of Kirkcudbright in southwestern Scotland. According to a testimonial dated November 10, 1801, written by the elders of their former parish, James and Helen had resided there since 1797, "...behaving themselves soberly and honestly... free of public scandal or any ground of Church censure known to our Session." The document also directs that they should be "received into any Congregation or Society where Providence may order their Lot." With this recommendation in hand, the young Nisbet family settled into the gardener's cottage on St. Mary's Isle which would be their home for over three decades.

There has been a succession of eleven Earls of Selkirk since the title was created in 1646. At the time of James and Helen's arrival at the estate, it was in the hands of the 5th Earl, one Thomas Douglas, the seventh son of Dunbar Douglas, the 4th Earl. Thomas's wife was Jean Wedderburn.



The Gardener's Cottage on St. Mary's Isle as it appears today

In Service to the Earls of Selkirk

Few details of James' employment at the estate have been found, but if it was similar to the homes of other earls (there were 39 in Scotland), the lord would have invested heavily in his gardens and grounds. Many featured walled gardens for flowers and vegetables, arboretums, water features, etc. and all of these required a large staff to maintain and improve. James' tenure would last 33 years, so one can assume he grew to play a key role in the operation of the estate.

The Gardener's cottage still stands today, having been modified and modernized. It is not far from a landmark known as the "Monks Well" which dates to the time when there was a priory on the island - a monastic house for Augustinian canons in the 12th century.

The slate-roofed stone house was the birthplace for the remaining 11 of the Nisbet's 13 children which appeared with regularity every 2-3 years. The youngest, Mary Anna, was born in 1823 when Helen was 45 years old.

In 1820, Thomas Douglas, the 5th Earl of Selkirk, died and was succeeded by his 11-year-old son Dunbar Douglas. Until about 1830, a board of trustees managed the estate on behalf of the child and during this time, James received the produce of the garden in exchange for a salary. The estate on the Isle was the seat of the Earl's holdings which at one time encompassed over 20,000 acres on 39 farms in Kirkcudbrightshire. The relationship between the Nisbets and the Douglas families would have been servant-master in nature. However, there are indications it was not a distant one and that James played vital role in operations of the estate.

One such indication is that when naming their later children, after exhausting the names of in-laws and themselves, the Nisbets chose to incorporate names of the Earl's family in their own. The 5th Earl had married a Wedderburn and had children named Isabella Helen and Katherine Jean born in the years 1809-1816, and he had an elderly sister Elizabeth who lived on the estate at the time. The Nisbets honored all of these, as well as the Earl's family name Douglas, in the names of their own children.

Another indication that the Nisbets were well known to

the family of the Earl came years later when the widowed Helen was moving away from Kirkcudbright and in a letter she describes a final visit with Lady Selkirk and mentions an annuity she had been receiving.

Finally, William Nisbet, when writing of his childhood in Kirkcudbright, noted “The Countess of Selkirk often came to our house and would sit down and talk with my mother in a most familiar way.”

At the time of Mary Anna’s birth in 1823, the little gardener’s cottage must have been a bustling place. Mary Anna (apparently named after one of Helen’s sisters who had emigrated to America) joined these eight other children who were probably still living at home:

- Douglas, 3
- The twins Jane Wedderburn and Elizabeth Catherine, 5
- William, 7
- Isabella, 10
- Helen, 12
- Henry, 14
- Robert, 16

The other four older children may have been off on their own at this time:

- Walter, 18
- Margaret, 20
- John, 22
- and James, 25, an attorney who earlier in 1823 had married Margaret Brown and was living in Tobermory on the Isle of Mull.

An Earlier Walter?

It is oft written in the family records that Helen and James had 13 children, all of whom lived to maturity. There is, however, a likelihood there was a 14th child. The Kirkcudbright parish register, which dutifully recorded all births in the region, clearly shows a child, Walter, born March 30th, 1804, to James Nisbet and Helen Nicol. One year later, in the same register, another son named Walter is listed with a birthdate of March 23, 1805. Both entries appear distinctive and authentic. Thus, it appears Helen may have given birth to a son in 1804 who was either stillborn or died soon after birth. Then, 12 months later came another son, which she again honored with the name of her brother Walter Nicol. No record of or reference to the earlier child’s death has been found.

in the UK, infant mortality before age 5 in the early 19th century was over 32%, so even 13 out of 14 children living to maturity was exceptionally rare.

CAVEAT LECTOR (“Reader Beware”)

To the best of my knowledge, the material written in these newsletters is based on factual information. My sources include family documents and mementos that have come down to me through the generations as well as family history research by my father and numerous others. HOWEVER, new, and sometimes contradicting evidence is always emerging and the story evolving, so please consider this as a snapshot based on the information currently at hand.

The Death of Robert - 1830

Helen and James’ son Robert died at age 23 in the arms of his mother. He had been ill for some time from an undetermined illness. His final hours were dramatically recorded by Helen in her personal notebook as well as a letter to her son James. His death was cathartic for Helen and seems to have been the point where her Christian faith really took a deep hold. It was this faith that would see her through many trials in the years ahead.



Silhouette portrait of Robert, first of the adult Nisbet children to pass away.

His brother William would later write “He had been an invalid for some years. He was a very stout, hardy boy, but got overheated while playing with some other young men...from the effects of which he never recovered.” His official cause of death was “dropsy,” an archaic term referring to an excess accumulation of fluid, often due to heart failure. In memoriam, William wrote, “He was a most amiable and pious youth; never have I seen any one more so; so patient, humble and wise, far beyond his years.”

As mentioned above, Robert’s death was a severe blow to Helen. She began a journal at that time in which she recorded his final hours, and then continued to make entries for over a dozen years on the anniversary of his death. The journal reads almost as a personal prayer book, beseeching her Almighty repeatedly to deliver her and her family from the adversities of earthly life.

A Second Son’s Death - 1831

Just nine months after young Robert passed away, Helen and James received word that their son John, age 30, was dying in Ireland where he was working as land steward for the Earl of Caledon. His brother William later wrote, “He died at an early age of consumption, brought on by a neglected cold caught while tending upon his hothouses.” William was quite influenced by his elder brother, a self-educated man with a worldly view. Before his work in Ireland, John had worked as head gardener at an estate at Gatehouse of Fleet, about 10 miles from his birthplace.

While in Ireland, John had married a local lass, Martha McMekin, and started a family. Some uncertainty surrounds the number of children, but at the time of his illness he had at least one infant daughter named Joanna.

Upon hearing of her son’s mortal illness, Helen wrote on May 26, 1831 in her private journal, “Now since it has pleased Thee to send us more affliction, O give us to drink the bitter cup with all humility...” She traveled alone to

Caledon, in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, probably by sailing vessel directly across the North Channel of the Irish Sea, a distance of less than 50 miles. She apparently arrived in time to tend her son in his final hours.

At his bedside, there was nothing she or the doctors could do to aid poor John. In the 1800s, pneumonia was the leading cause of death due to infectious disease and before antibiotics the only medical procedures applied to victims included useless practices such as bloodletting, blistering, and administering toxic chemicals like mercury. Pneumonia was considered “the captain of the men of death” and had a fatality rate of up to 40%.

John died on May 31st. She stayed a short while before returning home and on June 19th she penned this in her notebook:

“Blessed ever be thy great name that thou hast preserved me and sent me home in safety although it has pleased Thee that I should see another Son laid in the dust – thanks be to Thy Holy name that I saw him in life and had the melancholy satisfaction of closing his eyes Oh! what deep affliction has been my lot to see the once strong limbs stretched out in death far from thy natural home and all here who were dear to thee –“

In 1837, John’s widow Martha married a Scotsman named Alexander Oliphant and together with John’s young daughter Joanna they emigrated to America about 1840, settling in Richmond, Missouri. When grown, John’s daughter Joanna married a local man, James W. Black and she gave birth to two children, Mary and James, born in 1858 and 1860 respectively. Both Joanna and James Sr. died young and the children were raised in the household of their maternal grandparents. Joanna (Joey) Nisbet Black was buried in the Oliphant Cemetery in 1860. Attempts to research the fates and possible descendants of Mary and James have come up empty to this point, but there may today be Nisbet descendants in rural Missouri.

Pestilence Descends on The Countryside - 1832

“July 21 Now O Lord it has seemed good unto Thee to send this Pestilence among us...” Helen wrote this passage in her journal as a deadly cholera epidemic raged across Scotland. Killing thousands, it was unlike other outbreaks which were concentrated in the foul cities; this one did not spare the smaller villages such as Kirkcudbright. As with all of her ordeals, Helen relied on her faith to see her through. *“It is a matter of astonishment that Thou have withheld Thy wrath so long from a world that is living in wickedness. O how justly are Thy judgments...O arm us with firmness [and] give us not to shrink from thy pleasure.”*

In the end, the Nisbet family was left unscathed by cholera.

James Nisbet’s Death - 1834

Helen’s husband James died suddenly June 24, 1834 at the cottage on St. Mary’s Isle where he had raised his family for nearly 33 years. He was 61 years old. He is buried in the cemetery at Kirkcudbright, also known as St.

Cuthbert’s, lying next to his son Robert. A gravestone marks the spot, having been erected in 1861 by his son Douglas.

Among the Nisbet-related materials handed down to me by my father, I have not found anything written by James personally. I do have his snuff box, which contains a handwritten note from his daughter Margaret saying it had been taken from her father’s pocket on the day of his death.

A memoriam appeared in the local newspaper, the *Dumfries & Galloway Courier*, written by the editor, a friend of James’:

“Died at St. Mary’s Isle Kirkcudbright, on the 24th day of June, 1834, Mr. James Nisbet, Gardener, aged 61 years, deeply regretted by his afflicted family and a large circle of friends and acquaintances. Shrewd, rational, and intelligent, he possessed in no ordinary degree all the social and all the domestic virtues and it may be truly said of him that a more exemplary character never existed. He creditably filled his late situation, under the same noble family, during the long period of thirty three years, and gave numerous proofs of his skilfulness in all the departments of horticulture. He was also intimately acquainted with the science of botany, and had long enjoyed the honor of being a corresponding member of the Caledonian Horticultural Society.”



This gravestone for James and his son Robert at Kirkcudbright also memorializes other family members

*** END OF 1ST ISSUE ***

In the next issue of Nisbet News we will pick up the story in 1834 as Helen grapples with the death of her husband, leaving her with six unmarried daughters and five sons facing many challenges of their own.

In further issues I plan to document the stories of the following generations of Nisbets, many of whom led quite interesting lives. Stay tuned!