by Ian Nisbet Ross
iross212@gmail.com

Nisbet News

Issue #2
December 2021

Focus of This Series of Newsletters

This is the second in a series of newsletters with the aim of broadly sharing our common family history. The "focal family" is that of James Nisbet and Helen Nicol who resided at Kirkcudbright on the southwest coast of Scotland in the early 1800s, raising 13 children. This story is about that family and their descendants.

Continuing On With The Nisbet Story

The previous issue ended with the death of James Nisbet in 1834, leaving behind his wife, Helen, 56, and 11 surviving children ranging in age from 36 down to 11.

James was the primary breadwinner for the family and Helen was left in difficult straits. During most of the 33 years on the Earl of Selkirk's estate on St. Mary's Isle, James had been able to supplement a small salary with produce from the Earl's farms and gardens. Now, with several young ones still at home, the entire burden of providing for the family fell to Helen and the older children.

James died in June, and the following November 11, 1834, a holiday known as Martinmas, Helen moved to a house in the town of Kirkcudbright. One year later, she wrote in her private journal of prayers and remembrances:

> "*This is one of the days ever to be remembered by me. Twelve months has now passed away since I left the Habitation where I spent 33 years of my life. O Lord thou knowest how little I spent in Thy fear and how poorly did I serve thee still*"

In Scotland, the religious holiday of Martinmas was traditionally the date on which there was turnover in gardeners and other estate workers. Though never wanting to lose their top staff members, it was accepted by landowners that rotation among various estates would build a gardener's skill and knowledge. It was late autumn, and the harvest was in and preparations were complete for the coming winter. If one wanted to (or had to) seek a new situation, this was the time to do it, and in fact, James had come to St. Mary's Isle on Martinmas, 1801. Thus, landowner, the Earl of Selkirk appears to have chosen that holiday to move Helen out of the gardener's house that had been her sole domain for so many years.

According to her son William's autobiography, she moved into a house in town where she took on boarders. It also appears from her letters that based on her husband's long service to the Earl, she received an annual annuity of 10 pounds sterling, which probably covered the yearly rent on the house in town.

During the years 1835-38 Helen adjusted to her new life in town, raising the younger children and tending to her boarders. Church was an important part of Helen's life, and her journal gives testament to fervent religious beliefs. On the anniversary of their deaths, she visited the graves of her husband and son in the churchyard each year and recorded her innermost prayers on those days.

On September 7, 1837 she wrote:

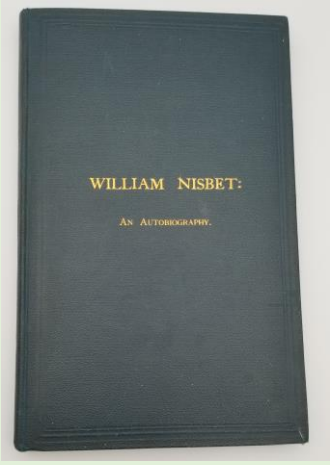
> *"This is the day my dear Son was consined to the grave – seven years has now passed over my weary head – O I could lay it down to rest from all my sorrows and cares but I will wait my Heavenly Fathers time"*

A Third Son Is Lost

> *"O Almighty God! it has again been Thy pleasure to visit us with some affliction in the Awful loss of my Son Walter"*

On January 12, 1839, Helen made this shocking entry in her journal. She had just received the devastating news that her third-born son Walter had perished in the sinking of the packet ship *Pennsylvania* off the coast at Liverpool.

Little is known of Walter's life. He was apparently named after Helen's well-known brother of the same name, a renowned horticulturist and author.



The William Nisbet Autobiography

A major resource for research on our family roots is the autobiography of James and Helen's son William, published shortly after his death in 1886. Written at various points during his life, William documents his "Pilgrimage or Journey from Infancy to Old Age..." The book is a must-read for anyone interested in our ancestors and I have found quite a few of his descendants have copies. If you don't have a hard copy, there is a very nice downloadable/viewable .pdf digital file at this link: https://archive.org/details/autobiographyoonisbiala/mode/2up

Walter was 33 years old and had pursued a career as a sailor. Just a few days before his death, Helen mentioned Walter in a letter to her son William, who was then working as a gardener at Buchanan House in Dumbarton, near Glasgow. Helen related Walter's recent adventures on a ship from North America, bound for Glasgow:

> *Walter arrived at Glasgow about 4 weeks ago after being Shipwrecked on the Island of Jura. The whole crew took shelter there in a barn but they regained the ship which had weathered the storm and they got a pilot for £10 to take them into Crinan -- they lost nothing. He did not remain in Glasgow... He was Chief Mate.*

The ship referred to in Helen's letter was the packet *Pennsylvania,* which continued south to Liverpool after leaving Glasgow. *Pennsylvania*, an 800 ton three-masted brig, 148 ft in length. It had been built just three years earlier in New York and was owned and operated by the Blue Swallowtail Line. Packet ships such as this offered scheduled transatlantic service for freight, mail and passengers, a fairly recent innovation in the sea trade. Companies with multiple ships could offer bi-weekly service, though the actual schedules varied widely due to weather conditions. Until the mid-1830s, these were mostly sailing vessels and as such were subject to the vagaries of wind and currents. By 1840, steam-powered packets began replacing sailing ships.

Pennsylvania, with Walter on board as Chief Mate, or second officer, had continued to Liverpool after its incident on Jura, completing its scheduled run from New York. It apparently laid over there during the Christmas holidays and was ready to return New York by late December. Walter may have taken this opportunity to visit two of his sisters, Jane, 20, and Isabella, 25, who were in Liverpool at the time, making a living as dressmakers.

According to a report of the Liverpool Nautical Research Society, the ship was captained by a man named Smith who was "an experienced and popular master...shortly due for retirement..." On January 6th, after a week's delay due to weather, they finally sailed on fine southerly winds. That night, however, the wind increased dramatically, and the ship was gripped in a powerful storm that was to become known as the "Liverpool Hurricane." The storm raged for several days, and the crew of the *Pennsylvania* did all they could to ride it out. But on Tuesday the 7th, the ship foundered on the Hoyle Bank at the mouth of the River Dee.

William wrote details about his brother's death:

"At the commencement of the storm he fell from aloft and fell to the deck. All crushed and bruised he was carried below, where he lay some twenty-four hours, no one having time to attend to him. Soon after the doomed vessel struck the deadly sand-bank, two of the sailors, fellow-townsmen, carried him on deck in hopes of getting him on board the lifeboat they were eagerly expecting. No sooner had they done so when a tremendous wave swept him and others overboard. He was seen on the crest of the wave to raise his hand to heaven and heard to cry 'Save me, that can.'"

Samuel Walters' painting of *Pennsylvania* (left) and other ships caught in the Liverpool Hurricane of 1839

The nautical society report notes that some bodies of the drowned were buried in Wallasey churchyard, but there is no record of Walter's being found. William, quoting the poet Felicia Hemans, wrote that his brother "'lies where pearls lie deep,' in the bosom of the dark blue sea."

More information on the wreck of the *Pennsylvania* can be found at:
https://liverpoolnauticalresearchsociety.org/

Three Sons Gone

In January 1839, Helen was bereft after Walter's death, but she sent prayers to her Almighty to salve her wounds:

> *"– I cannot mark the spot, his ashes will never mix with kindred dust. Alas! thou was hurried into eternity Oh! I hope the Almighty was near – in that awful moment when thou was engulfed in the boundless Ocean. O Lord thy will be done"*

Later that year, Helen made the difficult decision to leave Kirkcudbright, nearly 40 years after she arrived at age 23 with two young children. This was a time of worldwide economic depression and suffering was widespread. A banking crisis in the US had become global and this combined with crop failures in 1838 and 1839 created hardship throughout Scotland. Many rural residents left seeking employment in the cities, and Helen was forced to join this exodus. Too old to work herself, she decided to join her daughters in Glasgow where some work might be found for them.

One of the driving forces in her move appears to be the impending departure from the household of her youngest son, Douglas. As he turned 19, Douglas' future had been the subject of concern for Helen and his older brothers. James Jr., especially, was considered the head of the family now and Helen relied on his leadership and advocacy for his younger siblings. With regard to Douglas, the youngest of the seven sons, there was some difficulty in finding him

employment. In an early 1839 letter, Helen bemoaned the fact that James had not done more for his young brother and he had even suggested Douglas consider going to "*Austrellie,"* (a horrifying thought to Helen). She wrote, *"he seems to give me so little hopes of doing something for poor Douglas."*

In the end, it was a Kirkcudbright connection of James' that set Douglas on a new path. The son of the town stationer had emigrated to Charleston, SC nearly 20 years earlier. During a visit to Scotland, this man was in Edinburgh at one point and ran across James. In conversation, Douglas's future was discussed, and Mr. Alexander Gordon volunteered to take charge of him if he came to Charleston, insisting the young man live with him and his family while clerking in his store. This was intended to be temporary until Mr. Gordon found Douglas *"a situation, which he hoped would not be long."* ["Situation" was the word Helen used for "job" throughout her writing.] Brothers Henry and James offered to pay Douglas' passage and fit him out for the trip with the understanding that he would pay them back when able.

Helen had been worrying about Douglas' future for some time, but when a job offer arrived and was accepted, she was ill with worry and sorrow. Her letters and journal entries reveal a mother's deep concern about how he will make his way in the cruel world. *"Douglas, poor fellow, is a Boy who has no vice… he little knows what it is to be out in the world."* America was an unknown and distant place and Helen wrote with great sadness, "– *to part with all my Sons and this my last one going so far that it is very probable I will never see him more."*

Helen accompanied Douglas on the first leg of his journey, departing Kirkcudbright on September 26th and arriving at Liverpool soon after. They spent 10 days together there, lodging in the same house as the dress-making sisters Jane and Isabella, and the proud mother declared her son *"indeed a fine looking youth"* and *"everyone was taken with him."* Helen visited the ship, a brig named *Mindoro,* and pronounced it "*a good Ship with good accommodations, velvet cushions, etc. and 8 Staterooms Douglas occupys one of them – I paid Capt Turner £25 for his passage."*

Liverpool Harbor circa 1839

Helen could not bring herself to watch the ship's actual departure, this coming less than a year after Walter's drowning in the same waters. Instead, she stayed at her lodgings, praying for Douglas' safe passage. His sisters, however, were at the dock and *"remained along side until she was fairly well out."*

In the years ahead, Douglas be a source of continuing concern for his mother, but he eventually built a career as a shipping agent and would play an important role in the family later in life. Also, contrary to Helen's premonition he would return and visit her in Scotland more than once.

Although he would never have children of his own, and thus no direct Nisbet descendants, I still find Douglas's life quite interesting. He married a local woman, lived in the South through the Civil War, and late in life took charge of the orphaned daughters of his younger sister.

In an upcoming issue we will rejoin Douglas' story.

Six Unmarried Daughters

His departure for America did not stay Helen's worries about Douglas, but it was her six daughters who gave her the most anguish. As 1839 came to a close, none of the young women, ranging in age from Margaret, 36, down to Mary Anna, 16, were married or seemed to have any serious prospects. Margaret had moved home earlier that year and immediately contracted smallpox, from which she recovered. Though trained to do needlework, most of Margaret's career appears to have been one of housekeeper or lady's maid. She would join Mary Anna and their mother in the move to Glasgow. Helen Jr. was 28 and had her own dressmaking business in Glasgow, though this would seem to be of dubious financial success according to her mother's letters.

The twins Elisabeth (known as Eliza), and Jane, 21, had been apart for some years. Jane had moved to Liverpool with Isabella, 26 where they worked as dressmakers. Eliza, also a needleworker and living in the Glasgow area, had also contracted a severe case of smallpox that year.

The future of these six young women would be a continual worry for Helen right up until her death. She fretted over their finances, their religious beliefs, their bickering, and most of all, their seeming unending series of health crises which she detailed in her letters.

Prior to her move to Glasgow in the spring of 1840, Helen held an auction of household items. James Jr. whom she had regarded as the paterfamilias since her husband's death 6 years earlier, strongly advised her to minimize the belongings she brought with her. Her new home was to be much smaller than the gardener's cottage on St. Mary's Isle.

One of the family's most prized possessions was a collection of books and Helen took great care to send her sons a list from which they could choose books for their own library. She was especially keen that William get the gardening books that had belonged to his father. William, currently at Castle Semple north of Glasgow, was the only son pursuing a career as a gardener.

Helen reluctantly offered for sale *"everything except bedding, carpets, and articles which will carry without being damaged."* But she told William she intended to keep *" 2 bed steads and the sofa as it was John's and on it your Father died."* Due to the recession at the time, she was quite worried about how much the auction items would fetch: *"I am much afraid they will not bring much as money is so scarce."*

Helen's premonition about the auction was accurate and in a letter on April 29, 1840, the day after the sale, she told William that *"things did not go well."* She listed out the meager prices for which her home furnishings sold, writing, *"The Clock only brought £3..12, the best Chairs, £3 for 8... the best mahogany table £2..12... and all other articles in proportion."* As the pound sterling has appreciated about 100X since the mid-1800s, these prices for used furniture do not seem unreasonable, but sentimental value may have inflated Helen's perception of value.

After the sale, and the with remainder packed, the cottage seemed empty to Helen, and undoubtedly she felt quite melancholy. But as with all her difficulties, she put them aside, said her prayers, and carried on. She and Mary Anna left Kirkcudbright via steamer and traveled to Liverpool on May 23rd, taking advantage of the move to see her two daughters working there as dressmakers.

Before her departure Helen had a farewell audience with Lady Selkirk, Jean Wedderburn-Colville, the elderly widow of the 5th Earl, Thomas Douglas. Helen remarked, *"she is quite deaf and* [her daughter] *had to tell her everything I said."* After a third of a century of service, the women were well acquainted. According to William, Lady Selkirk "often came into our house and would sit down and talk with my mother in the most familiar way."

On May 15th, Helen made her way up the hill to the churchyard above Kirkcudbright visit the graves of her husband and son. That evening she wrote, *"I have this day visited the lonely Churchyard most likely for the last time – I will not describe the trouble of my mind – I may now say the bitterness of death is past – O may your ashes repose in peace until that Glorious day when we shall meet again."* Two days later, she attended Kirkcudbright Parish Church for the final time, and she poured out her thoughts in her private journal, including,

"Oh! lovely scenes a long farewell
I may no longer with you dwell
except in memory."

St. Cuthbert's Parish Church, Kirkcudbright

The Stress of Big City Life

After a visit with Jane and Isabella in Liverpool, whom she found *"doing pretty well,"* Helen and Mary Anna arrived at their new home at 27 Bains Place on Renfrew Street in Glasgow in early June. They would be living with Elizabeth and Margaret in this rented house consisting of five rooms and a kitchen, with the use of a shared wash-house... and taking on a boarder. Upon their arrival, she found her daughters *"well but in a sad confused state...workmen cannot be had – there are so many people moving."* The tight quarters were constraining for Helen but she bore it: *"not so much room as I have been used to – indeed I do not know what to do with my things, but we must put up with many an inconvenience."* Times were tough, but so was Mrs. Nisbet!

Helen must have found it difficult to adjust to city life after a lifetime on quiet estates and in small towns. Glasgow at this time was city of 250,000 undergoing fundamental change with the dawn of the industrial revolution and the arrival of thousands of immigrants from the rural areas of Scotland and Ireland. During the reign of Queen Victoria, it would more than triple in size, transitioning from a focus on cotton and linen to a center for heavy industry such as ironworks and shipbuilding. Crowded and polluted, Glasgow was a working-class city with all the issues that result from poverty – most notably disease. Troubles relating to money and health came to dominate Helen's thoughts and prayers.

In early 1842, son William, now 25 and an established gardener, made the decision to emigrate to America. On March 7th he married Catherine Angus, 21, and they boarded a ship the next week, destined never to return to their homeland. He left behind a mother struggling mightily to reckon with a troubled household. Later that year, Helen poured out her heart in her private journal:

"– the discord of my family is matter of deep affliction. O Mercyful God do thou direct my steps. Show me the way I should walk in – surely they are

perverse Children... To Thee will I cry for there is none other to whom I can unbosom all my Woe. O do Thou look down on this sinful House (or rather Family) in Mercy and not in wrath for it is of Thy Mercy alone that we are not consumed . O Mercyful God that ever I should have lived to see such Discord in my family. O support me under this great trial – I have no doubt deserved all this and much more – Gracious God. Look upon them and turn them from their sinful tempers – O Strengthen me, support me in Thy goodness – O blessed be thy Holy name I have good hopes that death will end all my troubles"

Helen does not elaborate in letters or journals as to the nature of the "discord" and "sinful tempers" in her family, but it appears tension among the daughters, and with their mother, were running high. Daughter Helen's dressmaking business had apparently run into trouble, and Eliza and Margaret could find no employment except taking in "white work" which was a type of embroidery on linen developed in the Ayrshire region of Scotland. It was *"wretchedly paid"* work according to Helen and financial pressures are evident throughout her letters of that time.

1843 brought further misery as that fall Margaret, 41, fought through a long and life-threatening fever. Helen nursed her daughter day and night for four weeks, keeping the younger women away to avoid spreading the infection. It was thought to be yellow fever, rumored to have been brought back by British soldiers returning from India (though it may actually have been a local variant of more common bacterial or viral infections). The Glasgow fever epidemic of 1843-44 was rampant in the poorer neighborhoods of the city and is recorded in medical journals of the time.

Finally, in early 1844, there was some uplifting news. Helen was tremendously relieved to inform William that his sister Helen was engaged to be married to a Mr. Hamilton. Just when it must have seemed all six of the Nisbet daughters were destined to become spinsters, Helen finally had cause for celebration. James Hamilton was a managing clerk in an auction house in Glasgow and his income must have been less than impressive as young Helen intended to continue her struggling dressmaking business after marriage. Her mother was quite glad Hamilton came along and wrote, *"I hope in God this marriage will take place as I know not what would have become of her – she has acted very wrong in letting her affairs run into utter confusion."*

Helen and James Hamilton were married March 11, 1844, in the Barony Parish of Glasgow and settled nearby. They never had children and Helen Nisbet Hamilton would outlive her mother by 11 years. She is buried with her mother and four of her five sisters at Sighthill Cemetery in Glasgow.

****** END OF ISSUE #2 ******

The gates of Sighthill Cemetery in Glasgow. Final resting place for five of the six Nisbet daughters and their mother

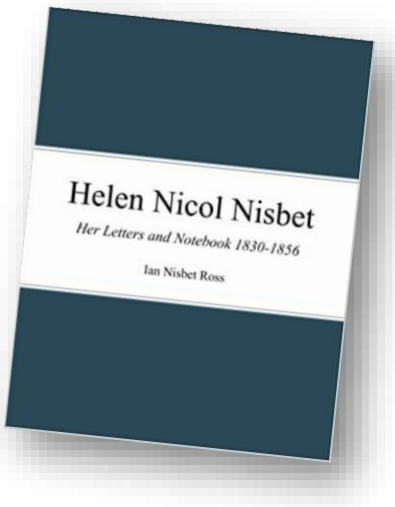
In the next issue of *Nisbet News*, we will continue the story of Helen Nicol Nisbet as she and her daughters face a series of crises in the 1840s and 1850s.

ANNOUNCEMENT

I have completed the scanning and transcription of the letters and notebook written by Helen Nicol Nisbet during the period 1830-1856. I've published them, along with background annotations in a book that is available at Amazon. Search on "Helen Nicol Nisbet" or click on this link: HNN Book

This book is self-published through a company called Lulu Press (google it) which makes it very easy and economical to produce a book. I highly recommend it.

Lulu allows you to set a price for your book and I set mine at "zero profit" but due to the costs of printing and distribution, it still carries a $40 price tag. If you would like to receive an electronic pdf file of the content let me know and I would be happy to share it for free! - *INR*



The James and Helen Nicol Nisbet Family

James Nisbet
born: Dec 25, 1772
died: Jun 24, 1834, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright

Helen Nicol
born: May 5, 1778, Aberlady
died: Feb 20, 1856, Glasgow

James Nisbet
born: Apr 25, 1798, Lochgoilhead and Kilmorich, died: Oct 19, 1849, Edinburgh

John Nisbet
born: Jan 18, 1801, Lochgoilhead and Kilmorich, died: May 31, 1831, Caledon, Ireland

Margaret Nisbet
born: Jan 31, 1803, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Nov 28, 1854, Glasgow

Walter Nisbet
born: Mar 23, 1805, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Jan 1839, aboard *Pennsylvania*

Robert Nisbet
born: Mar 4, 1807, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Sep 3, 1830, St. Mary's Isle

Henry Nisbet
born: Jun 15, 1809, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Feb 9, 1867, Tobermory, Isle Of Mull

Helen Nisbet
born: Aug 25, 1811, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Jun 5, 1867, Glasgow

Isabella Nisbet
born: Jul 23, 1813, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: May 11, 1868, Edinbugh

William Nisbet
born: Jul 21, 1816, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Jun 7, 1886, Providence, RI, USA

Jane Wedderburn Nisbet
born: May 17, 1818, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: May 6, 1855, Glasgow

Elizabeth Catherine Nisbet
born: May 17, 1818, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Mar 23, 1855, Glasgow

Douglas Nisbet
born: Dec 21, 1820, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: May 5, 1877, Cheraw, SC, USA

Mary Anna Nisbet
born: Dec 27, 1823, St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright, died: Aug 7, 1863, Glasgow