

About This Series of Newsletters

This is the fourth 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. Earlier newsletters can be found at the NN Archives link above.

Continuing On With The Helen Nicol Nisbet Story

1854 – A Year of Double Tragedy

The third issue ended at the close of the year 1853, when Helen was feeling better now that three of her six daughters were married. But she and the other three daughters, all with significant health issues, faced a long gray Glasgow winter.

In February of 1854, Helen’s youngest daughter Mary Anna, who had married Peter Ferguson in 1852, gave birth to an infant girl. The baby lived only 9 weeks. On April 19th Peter purchased a “lair” (burial plot) at Sighthill Cemetery in Glasgow for his baby daughter who had died three days earlier. The unnamed infant was laid to rest that day and the interment record for her burial lists the cause of death as “Weakness.” The page in the register at Sighthill for that week shows 20 children, most under 1 year old, among the 44 individual burial records – a testament to the terrible infant mortality of the time.

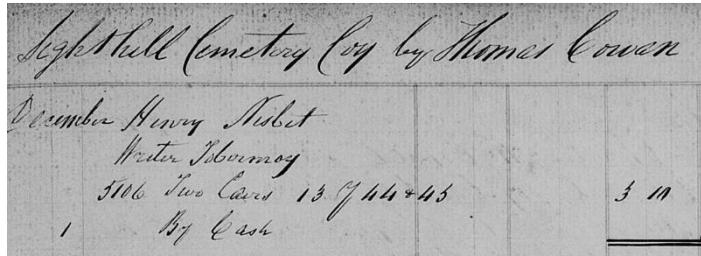
Later that spring, Margaret, Helen’s eldest daughter, developed a tumor in her breast. At first, she was able to go about her daily chores, but as the months passed, Helen reported to her son William in Providence that Margaret’s “complect put on a serious appearance.” She continued on,

“we had to call in another Dr besides the one we always employ and who both of them pronounced it incurable, nothing could be done to prevent the rapid progress it was at that time making and continued till the day of her Death. She was a very great sufferer and was indeed very patient during the time she was confined to bed which I think was about nearly 2 months. There was a very great discharge from the sore and she was a great handling, So much so that I was obliged to hire in a Sick Nurse to attend on her...”

Treatment for breast cancer in the mid-19th century was still basically nonexistent – it would be several decades before the first mastectomy. Advanced treatments such as radiation and chemotherapy were a century away. Victorian-era women with this horrible disease were instead consigned to a miserable and painful death.

Margaret Nisbet died on November 28, 1854 and was buried three days later at Sighthill Cemetery. Her brother Henry, the male head of the family and the only one with

any degree of financial means, purchased two lairs, #44 and #45, at Sighthill for £3, 10 shillings. He likely foresaw a need for multiple burial plots in the near future.



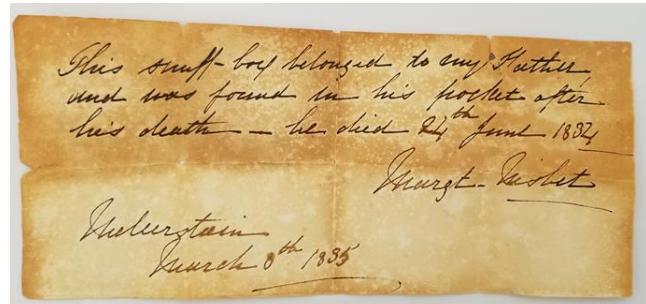
Purchase of burial plots called “lairs” by Henry in 1854. Each Lair accommodated multiple burials at various depths. The records of plot purchases and interments have been scanned and are available online. They are not indexed, so it takes some digging, but you can discover much in those details!

Margaret was approaching her 52nd birthday when she died. She had never married, working as a dressmaker and housemaid during her adult life. She seems to have left very little mark on this world, but it is thanks to her that we have an artifact of her father, James Nisbet (1772-1834). His snuff box contains a note handwritten by Margaret in 1835 while she was working at an estate south of Edinburgh called Mellerstain [a.k.a. Melurstain].



Snuff box of James Nisbet. The printing on the cover says,

*When keen misfortune's wind blows high
And Life's unsettled ocean's rough,
That friend who "always passes by"
His friendship's not worth a snuff.*



Margaret wrote, “This snuff box belonged to my father and was found in his pocket after his death – he died 24th June 1834”

Helen's letters reveal some details of the memorial service. "The funeral took place on the Friday the 11th at 2 o'clock. She was buried at Sighthill near where Mary Anna's little Baby lies. Mr Hamilton my son in law took all the charge of every thing so that I had no trouble whatsoever. There was a Hearse and train and 2 mourning coaches and now there is a great Blank in the House."

One can imagine that with the death of Mary Anna's baby and the loss of Margaret, the house on Renfrew Street was feeling particularly cold that winter of 1854-55 in Glasgow. Helen said that Eliza, 36, felt the loss of her sister more than others. After years of ill health, much of that time confined to bed, Eliza had recently begun to show improvement. Her twin sister, Jane, however, had now become seriously ill and Helen felt that Jane "will ere very long follow her elder sister to the grave."

Amid the death and sickness in the household, Helen rallied. She wrote to William, "The Almighty has strengthened me both in body and mind in a remarkable way that I even am a wonder to myself." As always, she put her faith in God, saying, "it is my daily prayer that He will be pleased to give me, to posess my Lord in patience, and prepare me for whatever He is preparing for me."

Helen's stationery of December 8, 1854 bears the ominous black border of bereavement that was customary for death notices of that era. The letter gave details of the tragedies in the household, but it also revealed that the remaining family had drawn closer together. Henry had come down from Tobermory and taken care of all the funeral expenses. The three married sisters in the area had drawn closer to their mother and "were very attentive all the time of the trouble." In a remark that stands out for its stark contrast with Helen's past complaints about "discord" and "sinful tempers" within her family, she now wrote,

"We all live in greatest harmony and not very distant from each other."

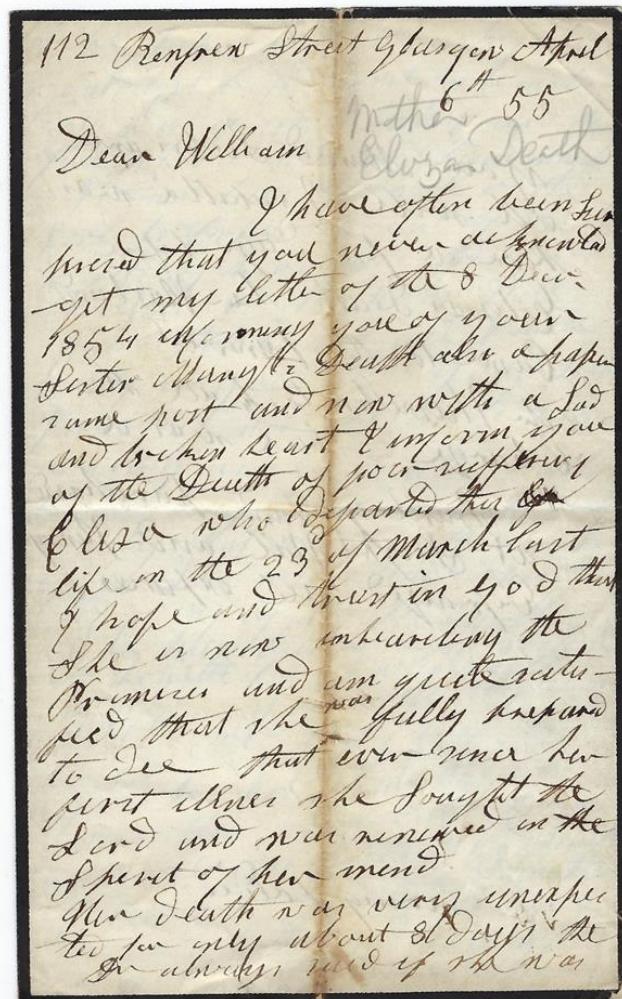
1855 - A Desolate House

William did not have time to reply to his mother's letter about Margaret's death before another arrived - this one again with a grim black border on the stationery. On March 23rd, Elizabeth Catherine Nisbet had died after an unexpected and sudden turn for the worse. Eliza, as she was called, was 36 and had been an invalid for years. But her death came as a surprise to Helen who reported, "the Dr. always said if she was to be taken to the Country she would get better..."

William was quite a religious fellow and Helen frequently reported to him on the spiritual status of his siblings. In Eliza's case, she wrote, "I hope and trust in God that she is now inheriting the Promises and am quite satisfied she was fully prepared to die...It has been the will of the Lord to take her out of a world of troubles and ever Blessed be his Holy Will."

Eliza was buried on March 27th at Sighthill Cemetery next to her sister Margaret who had died the previous

November. Her cause of death was recorded as "nervous disability" in the cemetery log.



The first page of Helen Nisbet's letter to her son William in Providence, dated April 6, 1855. Deciphering her handwriting, with its complete lack of punctuation and erratic capitalization, has been quite a challenge - but we are very fortunate these letters have been preserved.

With an almost unimaginably heavy heart, Helen continued on,

"But this is not all. I have to inform you that your Sister Jane is not expected to survive very long as she is also hastening to her long home, and it is very likely that before this reaches you she will have gone the way of all the earth."

"She has been in a poor state of health for upwards of 14 months - you will say, along with me, that I have been cursed here. But Blessed be God, he has strengthened me more than I could ever believe and given me pretty good health."

Already foreseeing an empty home, Helen informed William she would be "removing" from the house on Renfrew St. and had arranged new lodgings on the lower floor of the building where Mary Anna and her husband lived. This was #52 Rose Street in the Garnet Hill area of Glasgow, only a few blocks from the current flat that had been her home for 12 years.

Helen's somber prognosis regarding Eliza's twin sister turned out to be accurate. Jane Wedderburn Nisbet died on May 6, 1855, just 11 days before her 37th birthday. Like her twin sister, she had spent her whole adult life in the seamstress and needleworking trade. Neither had married or had children, and no pictures, letters or other mementos of theirs have been found. Their mark on this earth was very light.

Jane was buried on May 8th, in the same grave as her twin. The interment records are quite detailed and indicate she was buried at a depth of 6 feet, directly above Eliza, who had been laid to rest six weeks earlier, at 8 feet. The cause of death indicated in the records is consumption (tuberculosis), but the accuracy of these notes is questionable.

Helen was understandably grief stricken. On May 17th she wrote to William:

"I am not nearly competent to write letters in this day of my sore affliction. As you say in your letter, you can hardly tell what to say. So I may say it has been the Will of God to Bereave me of my three daughters in short space of five months and nine days."

Knowing William to be pious and concerned about such things, Helen related Jane's spirituality in her final hours,

"...I assure you that She died a happy Death, rejoicing in her Saviour and her God - sometimes laughing out, saying 'Christ is mine and I am his. He will never leave or forsake me.' And even in her dying moments, singing Hallieujahs to 'the Lamb who is preparing a place for poor Me'"

William had requested that his mother send him something small of his sisters' as a remembrance, but Helen was too forlorn to comply, *"there is nothing I could inclose in a letter except it was a piece of ribbon, and there is no such thing..."*

Helen had turned 77 years old the day before Jane died and she must have been crushed by the recent events. She had now outlived seven of her 13 children, and any parent who has lost even a single child knows the sense of unfathomable grief she must have felt. Parents outliving their children is a muddling of the natural order of things.

She informed William of her desire to move to the new flat and just *"keep her own fireside,"* adding, *"I must now spend the remainder of my days in the service of my god who has been so mercyfull to me from the Womb till now."* Helen closed with the anguished line;

"...and now I have a Desolate House"

Upon Jane's death, son Henry had asked his mother to come live with him at Tobermory for a while, but Helen refused the offer. She noted that *"Mary Anna is near her confinement and I will not leave Glasgow till I see her well again."* After losing a nine-week-old baby the year before, Mary Anna was nearing the end of another pregnancy. Never of a vigorous nature, she had nearly died bearing her first child and Helen said a prayer for her, *"I hope the*

Almighty will support her in safety as she was nearly gone last time."

Indeed, Helen's prayers were answered when Mary Anna gave birth to baby girl on May 22nd, 1855 and she was christened Helen Nisbet Ferguson. This girl's new life would have been some comfort to her grandmother during Helen's period of mourning.



This is a typical mourning dress of the early Victorian period, 1855-65. According to the custom in Scotland at the time, upon the death of a child, parents were expected to wear mourning clothes for one year.

1856 - Finally At Rest

During the remainder of 1855, Helen likely focused on doing what she could to help Mary Anna and the new baby. Now quite elderly, and living just downstairs, however, she was probably looked after by her daughter more than vice versa.

In March 1856, William received a letter from Glasgow, but it was not from his mother. His sister, Helen Hamilton, had penned a black-bordered letter which began:

My dear Brother,

It is with deep sorrow that I now sit down to announce to you a sore bereavement which God in his good pleasure has been proper to afflict us with.

Our dear Mother is no longer; she fell asleep in Jesus Wednesday the 20th of February at twenty minutes past eight o'clock P.M.

And in this way William learned that his mother, to whom he had waved goodbye nearly 24 years earlier, would not be writing to him again.

In her letter, Helen Hamilton went into great detail about their mother's final days and hours. Contrary to the long-term infirmaries which ultimately had taken her three daughters' lives, Helen's end had come swiftly.

She had attended church as usual the Sunday of the week previous and dined with Mary Anna that evening. But the next day she began to feel "*a weakness of her limbs, along with what she described as 'haziness' in her head.*" This continued for several days, but the Dr. chalked it up to severe weather at the time and predicted she would soon rally – which she did. Thus, it was a shock when that Wednesday afternoon Helen, who lived not far away, received "*a message to come instantly.*" She arrived at Mary Anna's to find her mother "*suffering severely from pain in her left breast.*"

The doctor was called and he, as with the ailing daughters the previous year, employed the arcane and often brutal treatments of that era. He ordered a mustard blister applied to her chest and gave her "*30 drops of some medicine*" that apparently was to make her vomit. Helen Hamilton wrote, "*he said he apprehended no danger whatsoever – that is was only a little bile on the stomach.*" After an hour or so, the doctor returned and seeing that Helen's pain had shifted to her back, "*he ordered her to drink an infusion of commomile flowers to facilitate vomiting.*"

This process continued for some hours and the misery of Helen being "treated" must have been awful to witness. Finally, and suddenly, Helen died. Her daughter related to William,

"...the bedroom bell was pulled violently, and I darted into the room and found that Mary Anna had assisted her out of bed [and onto a stool]... M.A. had just turned round to the fire for moment and on going back to Mother's side observed her head bent forward and her arms hanging down... we lifted her into bed and I think at that time her spirit was fled as she gave no sign of life, never heard a sigh, nor drew even a long breath. Her face was as serene and peaceful as a little child's."

In the end, the doctor concluded the immediate cause of death was apoplexy (stroke), and this was recorded in her interment record. Her symptoms of chest pain radiating to the back are more consistent, however, with heart attack.

Henry, being the eldest (and wealthiest) of the surviving Nisbet children was sent for immediately, and he arrived from Tobermory five days later.

DEATHS.
Suddenly, at 52 Rose Street, Garnethill, on the 20th inst., Helen Nicol, widow of Mr James Nisbet, Kirkcudbright.

In accordance with the customs of the time, Helen's daughters placed death announcements in three local newspapers. The above is from the February 23, 1856 edition of the North British Daily Mail. It is a surprisingly brief punctuation to a long and remarkable life.

At 3 pm on February 27th, Helen Nicol Nisbet was laid to rest at Sighthill Cemetery, buried in the same grave as her eldest daughter Margaret. The interment record notes her depth of burial at 7 feet, and that Henry paid 7 1/2 shillings in burial fees.

Spanning nearly eight decades, Helen's life was extraordinary and emblematic of the harsh conditions of her time. As a mother, she was exceptional in strength and dedication – evidenced by an almost inconceivable record of 13 children raised to adulthood during the early 1800s. Physically, she was indomitable and appeared impervious to contagious diseases that were rampant in those days.

Her writings reveal much in the way of inner doubts and sorrow. To her, the mortal world was a continuum of obstacles and hardships. But, especially later in life, her religion was a bastion of strength and comfort.

Although much of her writings encompass anguish later in life – as she endured the deaths of her husband and seven of her children – one can imagine there must have been times of pleasantness, and even joy. Certainly, her sons remember the early years in the gardener's cottage on idyllic St. Mary's Isle with a fondness that must have been shared by their mother.

Helen lived her life through her children and struggled along with them as each faced their own challenges. Seven had predeceased her:

- James (1798-1849)
- John (1801-1830)
- Margaret (1803-1854)
- Walter (1805-1839)
- Robert (1807-1830)
- Elizabeth (1818-1855)
- Jane (1818-1855)

At the time of her death in 1856, she left behind six surviving children:

- Henry Nisbet, 46, a widowed lawyer and banker at Tobermory on the Isle of Mull.
- Helen Nisbet Hamilton, 44, a dressmaker married to an auctioneer in Glasgow.
- Isabella Nisbet Wilson, 42, married to a teacher in Edinburgh.
- William Nisbet, 39, a gardener with a family of six children near Providence, RI, USA
- Douglas Nisbet, 35, a shipping agent based in Charleston, SC, married without children.
- Mary Anna Nisbet Ferguson, married to a warehouseman in Glasgow, with an infant daughter.

These individuals, and 12 grandchildren, became her legacy and the progenitors of future generations.



Sighthill Cemetery in Glasgow as it appears today.

The cemetery opened in 1840 and has persevered through immense change in the area. In the 1960's, 10 large government-owned high-rise apartment blocks were built abutting the property. By the end of the century, however, the area had descended into a den of crime, drugs and poverty. The name Sighthill was notorious in Glasgow. Beginning in 2008 and continuing to 2016, the housing blocks were demolished as part of a £250M redevelopment program. A video of the implosion of three apartment blocks in 2011 can be seen here: [video](#)

As the neighborhood awaits its next chapter, the cemetery, along with its interred inhabitants, slumbers on.

Notes on the Helen Nicol Nisbet Story

In telling this story, I have relied heavily on the two dozen letters and a personal notebook of Helen's that William saw fit to preserve – and that intervening generations have carefully stewarded. On multiple occasions in the last 170+ years, these documents could have been burned in a house fire, tossed out with the trash, or met some other tragic fate. Thank you to my father and his ancestors for this extraordinary gift of history.

In these newsletters, I have only extracted only a small portion of what Helen's documents contain. Reading them in their entirety was a riveting exercise. They give you a vivid picture of life as a woman in those difficult times and I assure you this will be required reading for my four granddaughters when they are old enough.

I have digitized, transcribed, and bound them into a book which you can get on Amazon at this [LINK](#). If you prefer an electronic copy of this material, please contact me and I will get you a digital copy for free (though I find it much easier to read in hardcopy).

Where Do We Go from Here?

We have followed Helen's life chronologically to its natural conclusion. The plan for future issues is explore the lives of her children, focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on the three who are known to have living descendants.

Thank you for your readership! – Ian Ross

** COUSIN'S CORNER **

A Shortcut for “Cousin-ing”

If you are like me, you find it hard to remember how the whole cousin scheme works. What's a 3rd cousin vs. a 4th? What does once removed mean?

Here is a little trick to help you quickly categorize a cousin:

1. Determine the most recent common ancestor you have with the other person.
2. Count the number of “g's” (greats and grand) in the ancestor's title.

For instance, if Jon Allan and I have a great-great-grandfather in common, (William Nisbet in this case), then we are 3rd cousins since there are 3 g's in g-g-grandfather.

“Removal” is applied to cousins that are from different generations, and it goes both up and down. With the above example:

- Jon's son would be my 3rd cousin, once removed.
- Likewise, I am his son's 3rd cousin, once removed.

Note: The cousin number is based on the closest relationship with the common ancestor. So, in the case above, Jon's relationship with my father, for instance, would be 2nd cousin, once removed, since the common ancestor William Nisbet was my father's great grandfather (2 g's).

Hope this helps!

James Nisbet (1772-1834)	Married September 9, 1796 Abbotshall, Kirkaldy		Helen Nicol (1778-1856)
------------------------------------	---	--	-----------------------------------

CHILDREN OF JAMES AND HELEN NICOL NISBET	Born	Died	Spouse	GRANDCHILDREN OF JAMES AND HELEN NICOL NISBET	Born	Died
James Nisbet	1798	1849	Margaret Brown	Mary Bell Nisbet	1824	1824
				Mary Bell Nisbet	1826	1873
				James Nisbet	1830	~1839
				Helen Nisbet	1830	~1845
				William John Nisbet	~1832	1866
				John Nisbett	1835	1919
John Nisbet	1801	1831	Martha McMekin	Joanna G. (Joey) Nisbet	1831	1860
Margaret Nisbet	1803	1854				
Walter Nisbet	1805	1839				
Robert Nisbet	1807	1830				
Henry Nisbet	1809	1867	Matilda Ann Douglas	Mary Miles Fletcher Nisbet	1831	1850
Helen Nisbet	1811	1867	James Hamilton			
Isabella Nisbet	1813	1868	David Wilson			
William Nisbet	1816	1886	Catherine Angus	James Nisbet	1843	1904
				John Angus Nisbet	1844	1908
				Henry Nisbet	1846	1849
				Jessie Gibson Nisbet	1848	1912
				William Douglas Nisbet	1850	1894
				Helen Nicol Nisbet	1852	1922
				Catherine Douglas Nisbet	1854	1925
Jane Wedderburn Nisbet	1818	1855				
Elizabeth Catherine Nisbet	1818	1855				
Douglas Nisbet	1820	1877	Sarah H. Turner			
Mary Anna Nisbet	1823	1863	Peter Ferguson	Infant Ferguson	1854	1854
				Helen Nisbet Ferguson	1855	1934
				Isabella "Belle" Ferguson	1858	1929
				Peter Ferguson	1862	1863