

About This Series of Newsletters

This is No. 8 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. The previous editions telling the story of this family are available at the website above.

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Message From Your Editor

Dear Readers,

Thank you for allowing me to invade your inbox this past year. I realize that some of you have read each edition end-to-end while others have probably tucked them away in a “read someday” folder. Some may have forwarded them on to children or other relatives. This is all excellent and meets my sole goal: to share as broadly as possible all that I have learned about our Nisbet ancestors. My hope is that curious future generations will discover and enjoy learning about this bit of their ancestry.

With this issue, I will wrap up the story of the “Nisbets of Kirkcudbright.” James and Helen were just one of sixteen sets of ggg-grandparents in my personal family tree, and I am starting to feel the pull of some the other branches.

I still have a few loose ends I want to chase down on the Nisbet front over the coming year, and if anything exciting comes up I will let you know. Otherwise, I’m going to shift to other family lines, and it may be some time before the next edition of *Nisbet News*.

My sincerest thanks to all the cousins who have responded to my inquiries, provided information, and been participants in this journey. Meeting you all has been by far the best part of this project. You have an open invitation to visit if you are in Northern California – and don’t be surprised if I knock on *your* door if I find myself in your neck of the woods!

Very warm wishes for a wonderful 2023 and beyond – making new Nisbet family history!

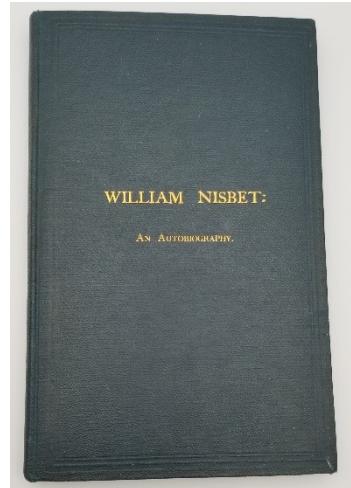
–Ian

William Nisbet (1816-1886)

William was the sixth of seven sons born to James and Helen Nisbet. Three sisters also preceded him in the series of children that spanned 25 years. At the time of his birth, the family lived in the stone house now known as Gardens Cottage on St. Mary’s Isle at Kirkcudbright.

I have saved William’s story for last because it is one that in reality has already been told – by William himself. Following his death in 1886, an autobiography was published, presumably by his children. Though a humble gardener by profession, William clearly had great respect for the written word and over the last several decades of his life he took time to document his mortal journey.

Numerous copies of the 103-page book, *William Nisbet: An Autobiography*, have been handed down through the generations and are prized possessions of many descendants. Personally, I am fortunate enough to have two copies of the green leatherbound original, as well as what appears to be the galley proof from the printer with uncut pages.



The cover of the original edition of the autobiography written by William Nisbet, published in 1886.

With each succeeding generation, the books get more thinly distributed among his descendants, and some, no doubt, are lost to the vagaries of time – fire, flood, and “unaware heirs” who toss the old volumes in the bin when an older generation passes on. Thanks to modern technology, however, William’s writings are preserved forever in digital form. Nearly 60 years ago, a member of the family with a sense of history donated their copy to the Library of the University of California at Los Angeles, and in 2007 it was digitized and uploaded to the website Internet Archive, a non-profit archive of millions of books and other media. The digital book can be downloaded in a variety of formats at this site:

https://archive.org/details/autobiographyo0nisb1ala/page/n1_15/mode/2up

It is a fascinating book and I highly recommend it!

Due to William's extensive documentation of his own life, I plan to present only a synopsis here and leave it to the reader to seek out further details.

William's Childhood in Kirkcudbright

As mentioned previously, William was the ninth in a procession of 13 children that began in 1798 with the birth of his eldest brother James. Though older siblings would have left to pursue adult careers while he was young, his childhood home in Gardens Cottage must have been a bustling place. His father James worked as gardener and land steward for the Earl of Selkirk, whose manor house was a short distance from the cottage. With newborns arriving about every two years, there may have been up to 10 children in the Nisbet household during William's childhood, creating a tightknit family in which the older children would have been expected to pitch in on chores, to the extent they could.

According to William's own remembrances, however, it was a childhood with plenty of free time to explore the surrounding countryside with siblings and friends. With his words he paints an idyllic scene of his birthplace and is detailed in his descriptions of the surrounding natural world. He loved to roam the woods and seashore and developed an appreciation of plants, animals and birds that would shape his life.



14. Kirkcudbright Harbour about 1840.

An early view of Kirkcudbright and the surrounding country

Like his siblings, after being taught to read by his mother, William attended the local Academy. There he received "the ordinary branches of English education" as well as some instruction in Latin and Greek. But by his own admission he was "by no means a diligent scholar, being far too fond of play and reading books other than those prescribed by my teachers."

During some of his free time, he worked alongside his father in the walled garden behind the cottage. The garden provided produce for the Earl's table but was also the main source of fruits and vegetables for the Nisbet family. It was probably this early introduction to working the soil, combined with his distractions outside the classroom, that led William towards his lifelong profession as a gardener.

Early in his life, William developed an awareness and appreciation of history. He recalls roaming the hills

surrounding Kirkcudbright, "visiting old ruined castles and monasteries and churchyards, sites and remains of Roman camps... and the strange mounds of earthworks constructed by the ancient inhabitants." He and his friends played as boys do, reenacting famous battles and the deeds of Wallace and Bruce. William wrote, "I was always fond of reading, especially histories and books of travel, tales of field and flood, old ballads, poetry, and legends of Scottish history." This sense of history, together with an obviously keen intellect, must have been what drove William to write about his own life and leave his own tracks in the "sands of time."

A Young Man Seeking His Future Path



Tobermory about the time William visited in 1830

When he was 14, William was sent to live with his brother James, 32, a lawyer in Tobermory on the Isle of Mull. The assignment was formative for the young man, as it helped convince him that the life of an office-worker was not for him. His best memories of his year on Mull are of roaming the hills and glens and taking in the natural beauty. He returned to St. Mary's Isle in 1831 and searched for employment near his home. Some insight into the propriety and religious beliefs of the Nisbet household is gained as William recounts his experience trying to obtain a clerk position at a store in nearby Dumfries. "... when I came home and told my parents that the store sold liquor, they very properly refused to let me take it."

Through connections with former Academy classmates, William secured a position as clerk in a local law office, copying documents and delivering messages. But as with his experience the year before in Tobermory, the outdoors was calling and "soon after I entered the office, I wished very much to learn the gardening business with my father, a business I was ever fond of... but my parents, especially my mother, did not think then it was best for me to do so. I never liked confinement within doors. It never agreed with either the constitution of my body or mind. Nature, I believe, fitted and intended me to become a gardener..."

At the age of 16, chafing at the desk work and not able to find employment as a gardener, William resolved to go to sea. He embarked on a cruise in the spring of 1833 and returned later that year having "seen a little of the world, the wonders of the great deep, and the manner of those 'who go

down to the sea in ships.” He had visited seaports in Ireland and Britain, as well as the coasts of southern Europe and northern Africa. Fortunately for William, when among the sailors, he “never received any bad usage. They are a class of men for whom I have great sympathy and regard.” This regard did not sway William towards a life at sea, however, and he returned home after this adventure more committed than ever to become a gardener.

In the fall of 1833, James Nisbet’s health was failing, and he proposed to take William under his wing, no doubt hoping his son could succeed him in serving the Lord of Selkirk. Under James’ tutelage, William worked long days in the field and pored over botanical books in the evenings – within six months he “had learned the botanical names of some twelve hundred plants, with much pertaining to their habits, use and culture.” William was finally in his element and took satisfaction in his father’s support for his chosen career path.

In June 1834, just 10 months after William joined him in the family business, James died suddenly. He had apparently been weakening for some time, probably due to heart disease, but his death was still unexpected and thrust the family into a dire situation. Just a month shy of his 18th birthday, William was nowhere near ready to take over as land steward for the Earl of Selkirk, and though he was employed briefly by his father’s successor, within months he moved to Edinburgh and found employment at a nursery on Leith Walk.

Answering A Calling

It was in Edinburgh, in 1835, that William discovered what would become a great passion in his life, the Christian religion. Though raised in a Christian household and well steeped in those values, by his own admission William was at the time living the free life of a young bachelor, “proud to be able to do the work of a man and earn my own living; carried away with the pleasures and hopes of his world.”

On a memorable day in September, while at the home of his brother James, who was now residing in Edinburgh, he read a few pages in a reprint of a 1658 book by Richard Baxter, *Call to the Unconverted*. Recently, as a young man, William had previously been exposed to thoughts and readings that “brought doubt on the truth of the Bible and the story of Jesus.” But on this day, it appears something in Baxter’s book resonated in William’s mind and his life was changed. He became fully and irrecoverably dedicated to the Christian faith.

From Apprentice to Journeyman Gardener

In Scotland at the time, it was traditional that gardeners seeking new positions and opportunities for advancement would rotate in their employment at Martinmas, the eleventh of November. In November 1835, William moved to a position at the estate of Whittingham, east of Haddington. Though we don’t know the precise birth family of his father James, William describes this area as the “quarter of his father’s family” and noted that he “learned some interesting particulars concerning them from people of the same name and race” (implying relatives).

During his two years at Whittingham, William lived in a gardener’s “bothy,” a communal living quarters for young bachelor workers of the estate. He writes in great detail about bothy life, including a description of the food provided – from which he digresses into a vociferous advocacy for vegetarianism, “If a person gets plenty of good milk he can almost dispense with animal food. Indeed, I believe the less animal food one uses, the better will it be. Much animal food, I think, induces many diseases, and, I do think it makes people ferocious and savage in their dispositions.” William practiced what he preached and “lived for months at a time without tasting animal food.. and hardly ever knew what it was to be fatigued, or feel a pain or ache of either stomach or head or any part of my body ; and working hard, too, often with a spade or scythe.”



Today, many estate bothies have been converted to holiday rentals

In addition to religious readings, William spent many evenings, especially during the long winter nights, in the company of the classics and he could quote noted Scottish authors. Later in life, he penned original poems and song lyrics in fond remembrance of his younger days in Scotland. Several of these can be found in his autobiography.

After two years at Whittingham, continuing to develop his knowledge and resumé in gardening, he left for another engagement at Balmae, only five miles from where his mother and family were living, they having moved into the town of Kirkcudbright after the death of James three years earlier. William made the 130-mile “most interesting and delightful journey” on foot and he documents this adventure in his book. He arrived at the home of his mother “a strapping chiel of five feet eleven... So changed they hardly knew me.”

After three months of temporary employment at Balmae, William headed for England, hoping to find a position at one of the estates there. Though now a journeyman gardener, he was considered too young and inexperienced to be hired as a head gardener or even a foreman, so he was relegated to work as a transient laborer. He took advantage of this time to visit London and see the “great sights” such as Westminster Abbey and the Tower. But “withal I felt lonely and homeless and discouraged by my lack of success.” He arrived back in Edinburgh “penniless.”

Fortunately for William, soon after landing at Leith Dock he ran into a former acquaintance and was hired on the spot

for transient work at a nursery in the city. During this time, his religious education was expanded by listening to the preaching of well-known ministers and for a time he considered becoming a "missionary to the heathen."

At Martinmas 1838, William was hired as a journeyman gardener at Buchanan House, the seat of the Duke of Montrose, near Loch Lomond. He joined the Secession Church at nearby Drymen and notes with pride that he successfully converted two of his coworkers to his faith. But the head gardener was "irascible and at times very unreasonable." This, and the man's apparent disdain for dissenters – such as members of the Secession Church – led to William transferring to nearby Levenside estate for another relatively short tenure of 6 months.



Castle Semple at Lochwinnoch, near Paisley

In November 1839, now aged 23, William began a two year stint as gardener at Castle Semple, near Paisley, southwest of Glasgow. He joined the Scotch Baptist Church in the neighboring village of Kilbarchan. According to his memoir, he gained a good deal of "notice at this time from frequently speaking in the assemblies of the church in Kilbarchan and other churches of like faith in that part of the country, as well as from preaching the gospel in different places around, in which I had the hearty approval of my brethren." Clearly, William had developed a missionary's zeal for his religion.

His visibility at the local churches was likely a factor in catching the eye of 20-year-old Catherine Angus, a daughter of John Angus, canal company overseer in the Glasgow area. She was a member of the nearby Houston parish.

This was 1840, the year his mother had moved the last of the family from Kirkcudbright to Glasgow, so he had many opportunities to pass time with Helen and his sisters. His younger brother Douglas (1820-1877) had emigrated to America in late 1839. In November 1841, William departed Castle Semple, taking a position at nearby Park Estate on the banks of the Clyde. This did not last long, and he left after a few months, disillusioned by the poor state of the gardens there. He stayed a short while with his mother in Glasgow, making plans that would change the course of his life.

Marriage and Emigration

On March 7, 1842, William, 25, and Catherine, now 21, were married at the Portland Baptist Church in Glasgow and

one week later boarded the brig *Stillman*, bound for New York. Due to the poor employment situation in Scotland, William had considered emigration for some time – letters from his mother about this time mention his consideration of Australia, something she argued strongly against. But when it came to the United States, he had read highly favorable accounts of the opportunities there and he decided to follow Douglas, as well as Catherine's brother James Angus, across the Atlantic.

The voyage lasted 57 days and was one of "much peril and hardship." His record of the harrowing journey documents the privations aboard an emigrant ship of that time, including a shortage of provisions and water. He and Catherine were fortunate to have a second-class cabin – his description of the trials of the passengers in steerage are bleak.

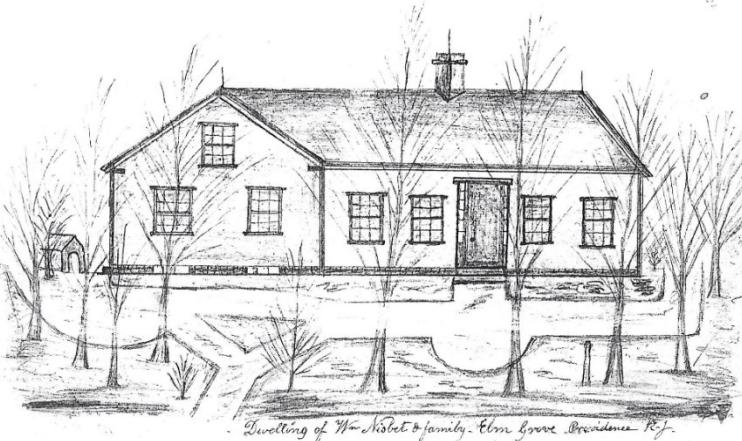


William and Catherine's ship was brig such as this. The manifest lists 77 other passengers, nearly all young emigrants.

Upon landing, William quickly found work at the Netherwood estate in Dutchess County, New York. He and Catherine welcomed their first child, dutifully named James after William's father, in February 1843. After a brief stint at a nursery in 1844, William was hired to take charge of the gardens and farm of Captain B. W. Comstock at Seekonk, RI, now called East Providence. Within two years, William notes that his "employer's affairs" became "somewhat involved" and he moved to Elm Grove, the estate of the late Moses Brown, in Providence. Here he would finally settle in one place for an extended period – 12 years.

Elm Grove seemed like a dream assignment for the 30-year-old gardener and his growing family. His employers were supportive and kind, allowing him to plan his own cottage in an idyllic setting "near a wild wood, with a romantic glen and a brook nearby, and within a few minutes' walk of the salt water head of Narragansett Bay." William and Catherine's second child, John Angus Nisbet, had been

born in 1844 at Seekonk, but the Elm Grove cottage would be the birthplace of their following five children.



William's sketch of his home at Elm Grove, Providence, RI
1846-1858

In addition to his work and family, William dedicated himself to his religion. In the late 1840s he and several others of the Scotch Baptist faith formed a new church in Providence. The church remained small, never surpassing 20 members, but William played the role of an elder and "many happy hours and blessed means of grace did our little gatherings prove to me." Ever a writer and historian, William penned two small pamphlets advocating for and giving an account of the Scotch Baptists that were published by the brethren of the church.

As an extension of his work as a gardener, William was active in the newly formed Rhode Island Horticultural Society and helped organize exhibitions and meetings. He was dedicated to furthering his profession by tutoring younger gardeners and aided in bringing over other Scottish-trained men to the estates of New England. If he had a specialty, it appears to have been "hothouses" and he became somewhat of an expert in these vital components of an estate garden.

In the summer of 1849, the Nisbet family was gripped by scarlet fever and their 3-year-old Henry, named after William's brother, succumbed to the disease. William felt the loss of his son deeply - "a beautiful and intelligent boy of great promise." One night soon after, he wrote a poem to his memory, saying "Often have I found much pleasure and comfort in thus giving vent to my feelings in homely rhyme."

1849 also brought the death of his eldest brother James in Edinburgh and in November, his employer, Mrs. Anna Jenkins, perished in a fire at her home. In the following years, William laid out the grounds and gardens surrounding the newly rebuilt mansion and remained in the employ of Jenkins family. By 1856, however, he was feeling a bit restless and embarked on a month-long "pleasure tour" to Canada, something he later described guiltily as an "unessential undertaking." He visited friends and toured the countryside, much of it reminiscent of his Scottish homeland. Niagara Falls was thrilling to the extent he dedicated a page and a half of his book to this brief stop.

At Huron County, Ontario, then still a frontier in the Canadian wilderness, William stayed with an enclave of emigrants from Kirkcudbrightshire, nearly all of whom had known his family back home. They made him feel fully at home and he was pleased to see that they embraced the same religious values as he. The families in Canada invited William to bring his family and settle there, but he demurred at the time, feeling the land was "either taken up, or far too high in price for me."



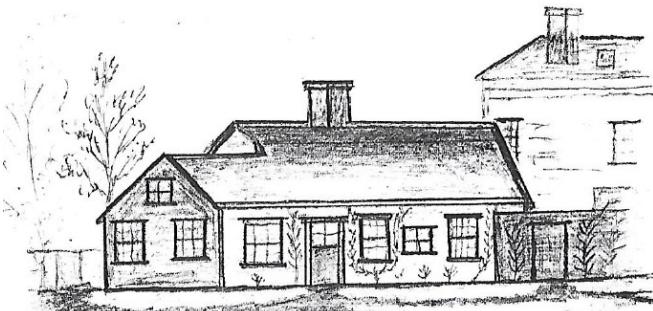
Our earliest photograph of William Nisbet, circa 1855, age 39

1858 was a year of change for William. His employers "had met with some reverses and concluded to give up their gardens at Elm Grove and dispense with my services." This put he and his family, now expanded to six children aged four to fourteen, out of the cottage that William described as "with the exception of my native St. Mary's Isle, I never yet loved or felt so much attachment to any one place..." Now, with "scanty savings from the small wages of the past years of toil," circumstances forced a change of heart with regard to Canada and William packed his family off to Stratford, Ontario, hoping to forge a new life as farmer or nurseryman near the wilderness frontier.

The family arrived at Stratford in April and soon after bought a small farm in nearby Ellice. It came equipped with a primitive log cabin and William set to with his boys, clearing trees and planting a crop of wheat and potatoes. But as William wrote, "the future seemed dark and uninviting." He was disappointed with the one room school which his children walked to through thick forest "where bears and wolves prowled around." He does not mention it specifically, but the lack of a like-minded religious group must have weighed on him as well - at Ellice he was surrounded by Irish Catholics (whom he notes were "exceedingly kind and attentive"). Within months, with their financial reserves nearly exhausted, William returned to the Providence area and was able to secure a temporary position as gardener. He sent for his family, and they were reunited in a rented tenement house.

Once again an itinerant family, the Nisbets left Providence the next year and moved 20 miles north to Millville, MA where he had found a good position in charge of the hothouses and gardens of Henry S. Mansfield. This

position lasted until 1862 when William returned to Providence and a long-term position with the well-to-do Ives family. These were the Civil War years, and William's opposition to slavery is mentioned in a few of his writings. But he makes little note of the conflict in his personal history, other than mentioning members of the Ives family who fought and died for the Union side. It appears the Nisbet family was untouched by the war, or he chose not to include it in his memoir.



View of the Cottage - 81 Power St Providence - on which the Nisbet family lived from 1 March 1862 until 28 June 1876 - from the S.W. corner of the Green in the garden William Nisbet. (Beginning to grow old, 1876.)

William made this sketch of his home at 81 Power Street in Providence where the family resided from 1862 to 1876

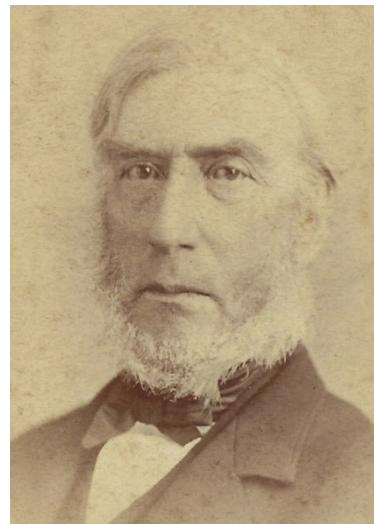
William's return to Providence also reinvigorated his participation in local churches, and he began a long-standing volunteer position teaching Bible classes at the state prison.

In 1870, William bought a parcel of land on Pitman Street which was part of the old Elm Grove estate. Looking ahead to his retirement, two years later he had a "goodly house" built on this land, "aided by a legacy kindly bequeathed to me by my late dear brother Henry." Henry had been a successful lawyer and banker in Tobermory and in his will he left 500 pounds each to his two surviving brothers. William's purchase of the Elm Grove parcel brought "the hope that it may yet be a quiet retreat for me in old age or for my dear wife or children when I am gone."

William marked 1876, his sixtieth year, with an entire chapter in his book, saying "this memorable centennial year of the Nation's birth has also been a memorable year in my life." This was the year William and Catherine moved from their cottage on the estate to the home he had built at 80 Pitman Street, the home that was to become his final stop in a long semi-nomadic life. The children had mostly left and married, though eldest daughter Jessie (b.1848) and her husband Alexander Munro and their toddler Catherine (Katie) shared the house on Pitman St.

In his writing at this age, William waxed expansively in expressions of his religious gratitude and, sensing that his "time is far spent," declared, "And now, when I am old and gray headed, I believe He will not forsake me, but will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom." As had been the case with his mother Helen, William's religious convictions brought him great comfort.

William made the final entry in the record of his life on April 4, 1885. It is brief - he senses "the time of my departure



William Nisbet,
Dec. 21, 1882
Age 66

cannot be far off." He reveals that in recent years he has experienced "real bodily sickness" though does not specify details of his ailments. His esteemed employer has died, and his hothouses are being taken down, the gardens remodeled. He feels "change and decay in all around I see" and is often led to "groan, being burdened." He ends his autobiography with yet another prayer and declares "the time will come when I shall be freed from this body of sin and death."

William's "freedom" from his mortal life came ten months later when he died at home on June 7, 1886, six weeks shy of his 70th birthday. He was buried in the family plot at Swan Point Cemetery in Providence. In the afterword of his book, his family wrote that William, in the last year of his life, was "unusually calm and happy in mind, taking a loving interest in his family and grandchildren and all of his friends." He was "a man honored and beloved by all who knew him."

At the time of his death, William was survived by his wife and six children. Catherine Angus Nisbet would live another



Catherine Angus
Nisbet,
Circa 1890

10 years. The eldest son **James** was a florist in Providence and had married Annie Lillian Franklin in 1874. They had two children, but today there are no surviving descendants of James, who died of heart disease at age 61.

The second child, **John**, born 1844, married a woman from Crief, Scotland, Mary McLean; they had no children and thus have no living descendants. He died of "apoplexy" while riding a streetcar in Providence in 1908 (most likely a heart attack - the curse of so many men of Scottish descent!).

As mentioned above, **Jessie Gibson Nisbet Munro** was living with her parents at the time of William's death. She had two children, the elder daughter Catherine later becoming a pioneering female physician and serving for decades at the state hospital in Columbia, SC. The younger daughter, Jessie Duncan Munro married Roy Harmon Smith and is the progenitor of a number of William's descendants named Smith, Bemis, Rogers, Harris, Manley, Ekkens, and Patrick.

William's fifth child (preceded by George who died at age 3) was named after himself and his brother Douglas. **William Douglas Nisbet** (b.1850) was serving as the auditor for the city of Providence when he died suddenly at age 44. His children with wife Isabella Hogg, included Robert Hogg Nisbet, later a well-known New England artist. A son Lewis Dexter Nisbet is the grandfather of a family of Nisbet cousins named Schell. The youngest son, William Douglas Nisbet II, has been succeeded by several other generations of "W.D.N.'s" and there is now a young William Douglas Nisbet IV living in Florida! Other cousins in this line are named Polulech, Robair, and Garcia.

William's sixth child, named after his mother, was **Helen Nicol Nisbet** (b.1852). Helen married a Scotsman, George Ross in 1880 and they had six children over the next nine years. Two died young, and among the others, only the youngest, my grandfather, Robert Murray Ross (b.1889) had any children, a son and a daughter. His older siblings lived together into old age at the family home, 14 Rhode Island Avenue in Providence. Robert's daughter was my Aunt Helen and she has descendants named Pollock, Edelman and Tisdell. Robert's son, my father, was named William Nisbet Ross and among his four children we have descendants named Ross, Bump, and Ross-Morton.

The seventh and youngest child of William was **Catherine Douglas Nisbet** (b.1854). She married Thomas Thompson Allan (known as T.T.) in 1875 and had one daughter and four sons. She was an artist and that talent runs strong in her many descendants whose names include Allan, Hopkins, Naylor, Hansen, Waterman, Krycki, Farrell, Robinson, Reeser, Clark, Horan, Gilbert, and Knox (my apologies if I missed anyone!).

From a genealogical perspective, William's progeny make up over 60 percent of the living descendants of the 13 children of James and Helen Nisbet of Kirkcudbright, which number about 100 at the 6th generation down.

I had intended this article to be a *summary* of William Nisbet's life, but I feel I have run on too long to be called that. I can't recommend strongly enough the book he wrote. It contains far greater detail and is better written to boot!

I'd like to conclude this story with an insightful assessment of William Nisbet sent to me by our cousin Bill Bemis in Tucson. Bill has studied William's papers and visited Kirkcudbright. He wrote about William:

"As someone whose career involved assessing the emotional makeup and cognitive status of individuals, I feel like I have gained some insights into our great great grandfather, things you probably already realize as well: he had a melancholic tendency, what I would clinically call a mild dysthymia. He was a bit obsessive-compulsive, as evidenced by his meticulous daily entries

regarding the weather and the minutiae of his work. He was, of course, deeply religious, and religious musings were a daily mental activity. I think he was happy in his marriage and appreciative of the blessings in his life. He was interested in others, particularly in their spiritual concerns. And, he tended to think the best of others. I expect those who knew him would have considered him a kind and honest man. He was very attuned to nature, something to be expected in a gardener and someone who grew up in a rural setting surrounded by the sea, fields, forests, and a variety of beautiful landscapes. He was artistic: a sketch artist, a poet, a writer, something of a classic 19th century romantic. I feel like I know him from all he has left us and I am very grateful that he made that possible."

Well said, Bill!

The Children of William Nisbet and Catherine Angus



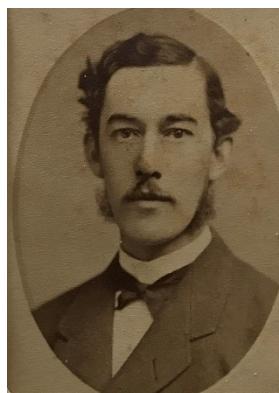
James



John



Jessie



William



Helen



Catherine

My Visits with Nisbet Cousins in 2022

This past year I was privileged to visit three of the Nisbet cousins I have met through this project.

Arizona

In March, I tacked a day onto a golf-buddy trip to Arizona and had a delightful visit with William (Bill) Bemis in Tucson. Bill is a member of the 6th generation, descended from Helen and James through William Nisbet, then daughter Jessie Gibson Nisbet Munro (1848-1912), then Jessie Duncan Munro Smith (1879-1958), and then his mother Laura Jessie Smith Bemis (1906-2000).

Bill comes from a line of family historians and has inherited that interest, bolstered by his being named after William Nisbet. Through his family, he has inherited some artifacts from the Nisbet household in Providence and has spent some time in Scotland tracing his roots. Bill was very generous with his time and shared what information he had. A family bible of William Nisbet's that he has is the source of the revelation that James Nisbet's father was also named James. He also gave me copies of some sketches William had done of his childhood home in Kirkcudbright and these added greatly to our visit to Gardens Cottage later in the year.



Bill Bemis and his wife Rebecca have a wonderful southwest-style home in Tucson, AZ, where the dry climate is perfect for preserving the artifacts he has inherited from his Nisbet ancestors. In addition to sharing his knowledge of family history, Bill was kind enough to give me a tour of nearby Saguaro National Park – he has extensive knowledge of the desert ecology. It was a memorable visit.

Maine

In late May, Jody and I detoured on our way to Scotland in order to visit cousin Jonathan David Allan in Sanford, ME. Jon has been a big fan of the Nisbet project and was very helpful in identifying other cousins in the Allan line – those descended from William Nisbet's youngest daughter Catherine Douglas Nisbet Allan (1854-1925). Like me, Jon is also of the 6th generation down from Helen and James of Kirkcudbright – his father was David Nisbet Allan (1920-2004) and his grandfather was James Angus Allan (1879-1939), the eldest of the four sons of Catherine and T.T. Allan. The current generations of the

Allan line are spread across North America, from Alaska to Florida and California to Maine – and also in the Philippines!

Jon and his wife Nancy were gracious hosts and welcomed us into their home. Jon has a painting done by Catherine Nisbet Allan – a seashore landscape of Block Island, RI – which he treasures. Jon gave me a couple of old family photographs I've added to the archives here at home.



We had a great visit with Jon Allan his wife Nancy Page in Sanford, ME. Jon is a collector and dealer in memorabilia, autographs, cards, etc. and has many interesting stories to tell.

We felt privileged to meet them and being treated to local lobster rolls was exactly that – a treat!

North Carolina

In July, while accompanying a good friend on a bucket-list golf trip to Pinehurst, NC, I detoured for a day to Charlotte, a couple of hours away. There I met up with Louise Try, one of the first Nisbet cousins I had tracked down as part of this project. Louise is an avid student of family history and has a number of artifacts handed down through the generations. Louise is from the branch of the family descended from James and Helen's youngest daughter, Mary



Louise Try spent almost an entire day with me sharing her Nisbet-related mementos and helping to expand the story of our ancestors. As with my other visits, I was treated to lunch, which in this case embodied true Southern hospitality – local shrimp and two fresh salads. Thank you Louise!

Anna, born at the Gardens Cottage in Kirkcudbright in 1823. After Mary Anna died, her two orphaned teenage daughters were brought to Charleston in 1871 by her brother Douglas who was a shipping agent there. Louise's mother was Helen Louise Williamson Try (1922-2003), daughter of Helen Ferguson Breeden Williamson (1890-1953) and granddaughter of Mary Anna's youngest daughter Isabella "Belle" Ferguson Breeden (1858-1929).

Just like her other Nisbet cousins, Louise was very gracious with her time and sharing of Nisbet-related mementos. It was exciting to see the original diary in Douglas Nisbet's hand, documenting his travels in Scotland in 1851. Also, her sister, Helen Nisbet Try, who lives nearby, has what may be the only known images of James and Helen – two miniature portraits in gilded frames.

From an album that once belonged to Belle Ferguson Breeden, Louise, is also the source of many photographs of old Nisbet relations that I have used in these newsletters. I am so appreciative that she is carefully preserving the artifacts. I felt very fortunate to have met her and thankful for allowing me to spend hours poring over the Nisbet artifacts.

All three of these visits in 2022 were a wonderful aspect of this Nisbet research, one that I had not imagined when I first started. Thanks again – and hopefully they are not the last.

The Search for James Nisbet Sr.

A "brick wall" to a genealogist is the ancestor beyond which it is impossible to push back further along that branch of the family tree. James Nisbet (1772-1834) is that brick wall along our Nisbet line.

We know that his wife Helen Nicol was the youngest of 12 children born to John Nicol and Margaret Welsh, but little is known about the birth family of James. My father, and now I, have spent many hours examining the Old Parish Registers (OPRs) of Scotland and other sources, trying to tease out clues to where James was born, and the names of his parents and siblings. Others have made similar attempts, but his birth family remains mostly a mystery.

One important revelation comes from a bible that belonged to William Nisbet. In what is clearly his own distinctive penmanship, William wrote that his "*paternal grandfather was James Nisbet of Haddington, Scotland.*" This passage has focused the search on a "James Sr.," the father of our James born 1772.

This past year I resurrected the search for James Sr., spending several hours combing the town council minutes of Haddington, ~17750-1820 during a trip to Scotland. At over 600 pages, this task quickly overwhelmed us. We found a number of references to Nisbets, as the family name was prevalent in that region, but came across nothing that would connect directly to our James Sr.

Many, many hours spent online searching the OPRs have yielded some possible clues about James Sr. and his family, but nothing definitive. It is a great puzzle of logic with many leads ending with "if this, then that can/cannot be true."



A map of the many parishes of Haddingtonshire, circa 1800.

Having exhausted most avenues of research, I collected all that work into a paper summarizing where the search stands. If anyone would like a copy – out of general interest or to carry on your own research – please let me know. I have also posted it on my website here: [The Search for James Nisbet Sr](#)

A summary of what is known or suspected about James Sr. is below:

- Likely served as a schoolteacher in or around Haddington and lived to a relatively old age. (One theory, however, is that James Sr. was not himself the schoolteacher, but it was his father or grandfather, and that person may have been William Nisbet, a known schoolteacher in nearby Yester.)
- James Sr.'s family was from the area east of Haddington, in what was called Haddingtonshire at the time (now East Lothian).
- James Sr.'s wife may have been named Margaret.
- He may have had other sons (born after James Jr. in 1772) named Robert and/or William, and one of them may have had a son named William.

MUCH more detail can be found in the paper cited above. I hope it will be useful to someone else who wants to try to punch through our Nisbet "brick wall."

The Nisbet Society

I recently joined the Nesbitt/Nisbet Society of North America, which is affiliated with the N/N Society of the UK. The society exists to identify and preserve the N/N heritage and seeks to promote it through attendance at games and other gatherings. Membership is only \$25 per year and one of the most useful and interesting aspects of joining has been gaining access to over 25 years of newsletters in their electronic archive. The articles in these newsletters, written by members, really tell the story of the greater Nisbet clan.

The home website of the organization is <https://www.ibydeit.org/>

The Nisbet DNA Project

Through the aforementioned Nisbet Society, I became aware of Nisbet DNA Project being conducted by several members who are dedicated genealogists. The goal is to use DNA testing to determine possible common ancestors.

The project uses the Y-DNA method which follows the male side of the line and thus requires samples from men who come from an unbroken line of Nisbets. For our particular branch of the Nisbet tree, this is a bit of a challenge as many of us are descended from female Nisbets (thus the plethora of surnames other than Nisbet on our known-descendant chart).

Thanks to my work to identify all the descendants of James and Helen Nisbet of Kirkcudbright, however, I found we do have a few men who meet the unbroken-male-line criteria. One is a member of the 6th generation down from James and Helen, and his name interestingly enough is James Nisbet as well. Known as Jim, he is a retired catholic priest and Biblical scholar living in Central California. Jim is descended from James and Helen's son James (b.1798), through his son John (b. 1835) who emigrated to Canada. Jim's grandfather was John's son Robert Francis Nisbet (b.1885) who emigrated to San Diego, CA around 1926. Jim's father was Harry Nisbet (b. 1914) and he had a sister Jane Marie Nisbet Bracken (1943-2016).



On behalf of your many Nisbet cousins, thank you Fr. James Nisbet for participating in the Nisbet DNA Project!

After I contacted him and explained the Nisbet DNA project, Jim graciously agreed to participate. The project is being conducted through FamilyTreeDNA and I coordinated sending a kit to Jim which he duly returned in May 2022. His results are now part of the growing Nisbet database.

As of this date, Jim's DNA results have not produced any conclusive connections with other known ancestors. But there are 17 Nisbet matches that indicate a relationship, most of whom are in Scotland. Not many of these individuals have genealogical records going back into the 1700s, but we know from the DNA results that there are common ancestors out there in earlier generations – the generations before recordkeeping became the norm.

I plan to follow-up with some of the men who matched with Jim to see if we can identify connections.

DNA “Dilution”

One reason that DNA testing does not instantly solve genealogical riddles is that the amount of shared DNA diminishes rapidly through succeeding generations. Below is a table showing this statistical “dilution,” on average.

When it comes to cousins, an easy way to remember the definition of 2nd, 3rd, etc. is to look at the common ancestor and “count the g’s.” For instance, 2nd cousins have a common great-grandparent (2 “g’s”) and 3rd cousins have a common great-great-grandparent.

Relationship	Average % DNA Shared
Identical Twin	100%
Parent-Child, Full Sibling	50%
Grandparent- Grandchild, Aunt/Uncle- Niece/Nephew, Half Sibling	25%
1st Cousin	12.5%
2nd Cousin	3.13%
3rd Cousin	0.78%
4th Cousin	0.20%

The above are only averages, however, and there is a wide variation due to the inherent uncertainties of genetics and reproductive biology. These uncertainties are what lead to the great diversity of inherited traits, even among closely related family members. Bottom line – DNA testing has its limitations with regard to tracing a person's specific ancestral line. But it is fun!

Future Work

As I wrote in my introduction, I am going to be ratcheting back a bit on my Nisbet work and delving into some of my other family lines. I will, however, keep things percolating, and have these items on my to-do list:

- Finish transcribing, with the help of Louise Try, the Douglas Nisbet diary of his 1851 trip to Scotland – a fascinating tale.
- Follow-up with potential matches from the Nisbet DNA project, continuing the search for “James Sr.”
- Keep the radar on high alert for any new information that sheds light on “the Nisbets of Kirkcudbright.”
 - If any cousins uncover any new documents, artifacts, or other Nisbet mementos – PLEASE contact me! I know there is more out there in attics, storage lockers and dusty closets!

The Nisbets of Kirkcudbright - Cast of Characters

As the final item in this issue, I am including the following table outlining the focus family of my research – as a “decoder ring” for those of you finding hard to keep everyone straight!



The Nisbet Family of Kirkcudbright, Scotland		
James Nisbet	1772-1834	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gardener/land steward 1801-1834 for the Earl of Selkirk at St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright - birthplace Haddingtonshire, parents unknown - buried at St. Cuthbert's Churchyard, Kirkcudbright
Helen Nicol	1778-1856	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - born in East Lothian but living at Kirkcaldy before her marriage in 1796 to James - mother of 13 children who all lived to maturity - seven of her adult children died during her lifetime - a god-fearing Christian churchgoer - buried at Sighthill Cemetery, Glasgow
The Nisbet Children		
James Nisbet	1798-1849	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lawyer in Tobermory, later Edinburgh - married Margaret Brown in 1823 - 6 children; only one, John, had children. - buried at Calton Hill Cemetery, Edinburgh
John Nisbet	1801-1831	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gardener at Calley House and later land steward at Caledon, Ireland where he died at age 30 - married Martha McMekin who remarried and emigrated to Missouri - one child, Joanna (Joey); she had two children
Margaret Nisbet	1803-1805	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - seamstress and domestic servant - never married - died of breast cancer, buried at Sighthill Cemetery, Glasgow
Walter Nisbet	1805-1839	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - may have been preceded by another son Walter who died during/soon after birth in 1804 (parish records) - seaman and later chief mate aboard ships - died in shipwreck in the "Liverpool Hurricane" of 1839
Robert Nisbet	1807-1830	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - worked with his father as gardener on St. Mary's Isle, Kirkcudbright - died in his mother's arms at age 23 after a long illness - buried at St. Cuthbert's Churchyard, Kirkcudbright
Henry Nisbet	1809-1867	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lawyer and banker at Tobermory, Isle of Mull - married Matilda Ann Douglas in 1830; she died at Edinburgh Lunatic Asylum in 1849. - one child, Mary Miles Fletcher Nisbet who died at age 18 of TB, leaving one son, Henry Nisbet Pritchard. - buried at Tobermory Cemetery



Helen Nisbet	1811-1867	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Operated a business as seamstress in Glasgow- may have married a Robert Galbraith at Greenock in 1834 and widowed soon after- married James Hamilton in 1844, no children- wrote letter to William after their mother's death- buried at Sighthill Cemetery
Isabella Nisbet	1813-1868	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- seamstress and domestic helper- married widower David Wilson in 1853, no children- appears to have cared for her sister Mary Anna's daughters after her death in 1863- buried with husband at Warriston Cemetery, Edinburgh
William Nisbet	1816-1886	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- made career as gardener- married Catherine Angus in 1842 and emigrated to America, settling in Providence, RI- seven children, six living to maturity- wrote autobiography published after his death- buried at Swan Point Cemetery in Providence
Elizabeth Catherine Nisbet	1818-1855	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- needleworker and seamstress- twin of Jane- never married, died at age 36- buried at Sighthill Cemetery
Jane Wedderburn Nisbet	1818-1855	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- needleworker and seamstress- twin of Elizabeth- never married, died 6 weeks after her twin sister- buried at Sighthill Cemetery
Douglas Nisbet	1820-1877	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- emigrated to America in 1839- Shipping agent in South Carolina- married Sara H. Turner in 1853, no children but in 1871 took custody of Mary Anna's two daughters- buried at Old St. David's Cemetery, Cheraw, SC
Mary Anna Nisbet	1823-1863	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- needleworker and domestic helper- married Peter Ferguson in 1852- four children, two daughters lived to maturity- buried at Sighthill Cemetery with husband and two young children

Online at this link : [Cast of Characters](#)