

The Family of Mary Slessor

Mary Slessor was born in Aberdeen on 2nd December 1848. She was the daughter of Robert Slessor and his wife Mary Mitchell.

Mary Mitchell was an only child. She was born on 31st May 1821 in the parish of Old Meldrum, Aberdeenshire. She was the daughter of William Mitchell and Ann Wilson who were married on 14th September 1820 in Old Meldrum.

Mary Mitchell gave birth to *eleven* children. The evidence for this derives from the birth registration of Susan Slessor in 1855.

This was the first year of Civil Registration in Scotland. In this year the authorities required parents to give more information than in subsequent years.

Susan Slessor's birth registration states that she was born on 3rd March 1855 at Jack's Brae, Aberdeen. Her father Robert Slessor was 34 years of age and born in the parish of Old Machar – Aberdeen. Mary Mitchell, Mrs Slessor was the same age. Susan was recorded as being her ninth child. She had previously given birth to five boys and three girls. Two boys and one girl (not including Susan) were living at this date, 3 boys and 2 girls were dead. Mr and Mrs Slessor had been married in 1840.

On the census of 1841, Robert and Mary are found living on Ann Street Aberdeen. There are no children. Robert is 25 and Mary 20.

On the census of 1851, Robert and Mary are living at John Street, Aberdeen. Mary Slessor is aged 2 and her brother William Slessor is aged 8 months.

On the 1861 census the family are living at Dura Street, Dundee. Mary is now aged 12, William is 10, Susan is 6 and by now Mary has another brother, John aged 3.

The names of all the children born to Robert Slessor and his wife Mary Mitchell are not known, however it is reasonably certain that four of them: two boys and two girls, died as very young infants and before they could be baptised.

It is very likely that two and perhaps three of these children born to Robert Slessor and Mary Mitchell were born before 1844, following their marriage in 1840.

The first of Robert and Mary's children that we have a record of is Robert Slessor (junior) born on 18th July 1844. His christening is recorded (as 'Slisser') in the register of Old Machar, Aberdeen for 1844. He was certainly deceased by the time that the census of 1851 was taken. Mary would not have remembered him.

The second of Robert Slessor and Mary Mitchell's children that we have a record of is Mary Slessor herself. Again the register of Old Machar, records her birth on 2nd December 1848. It is almost certain that there was at least one child and perhaps two born between Robert and Mary, but we know nothing of this child/these children.

The census of 1851 records that there was a son named William who was '8' – in fact this is a mistake. It should read 8 months. William therefore was born in the autumn of 1850, and would have been the next child born to the family after Mary. There has not been any christening found for William.

William Slessor appears on the 1861 census when he was (correctly this time) recorded as being 10 years old. William died on 16th April 1870 in Dundee. His age was recorded as 20, though he would actually have been 19 at the time. He was recorded as an apprentice blacksmith. He died from tuberculosis.

The next child is *a second* Robert Slessor junior. He was born probably in 1852. He died on 9th December 1860 in Dundee. His age was recorded as 8 years. The cause of death was recorded as 'croup'.

The death registration is the only record that we have of this child, but it is this second Robert Slessor, a younger brother that Mary would have remembered and not the elder one who may have died before she was even born.

Susan Slessor was the ninth child and the next to be born. She is later known as Susan Watkins Slessor. It is not known why she was given this middle name. It is possible that it was the surname of a Godparent, if she was christened.

Susan was a dressmaker. She died of a brain haemorrhage in Edinburgh on 17th April 1885 aged 29. She was usually resident in Dundee, so she may have been taken ill on a visit to Edinburgh. Mary Slessor registered her sisters' death. Mary at this date gave her address as Topsham in Devon (England).

John Patterson Slessor was born on 18th November 1857 after the family's move to Dundee. It is known that John Slessor emigrated to New Zealand, but died unmarried shortly after his arrival.

The eleventh and last of Robert Slessor and Mary Mitchell's children was Jane Ann Slessor. She was born in Dundee on 24th February 1862. This child is recorded on the 1881 census as 'Annie Jane' Slessor. From this we can say with reasonable confidence that she was in fact known in life as 'Annie' Slessor.

Annie Slessor died in Devon, England in 1886. She was registered as 'Ann Jane Slessor' and her age was recorded as 24.

Mary Mitchell, the mother of these children also died in Devon. She died shortly before her youngest child in 1885. Her age was correctly recorded as 64.

Robert Slessor, Mary's father had died in Dundee 15 years prior to his wife. He died on 16th September 1870. His death, registered by Mary Slessor records that he was the son of another Robert Slessor and his wife Jane McPherson. This is an important detail.

The marriage of the parents of Robert Slessor is recorded in Old Machar (Aberdeen). Robert 'Slessor' and Jean 'Macpherson' were married on 4th March 1815. The name of the mother is recorded in a slightly different way from the death registration, but this is not a problem. In Scotland persons named 'Jane' were usually referred to as 'Jean' or 'Jeannie'.

Robert Slessor's christening is also recorded in Old Machar, Aberdeen. He was baptised there on 12th December 1815. His father Robert was recorded as a Labourer resident in the Gilcolmston district of Aberdeen. One of the witnesses was one Alexander Slessor.

It is worth saying that many biographies of Mary Slessor suggest that her father Robert Slessor was from Buchan. This is clearly not true. Mary Slessor's father was born in Aberdeen. It is however quite possible, indeed very likely that his father before him (Mary Slessor's grandfather Robert Slessor) was from Buchan.

Attempts were made to trace Mary's grandfather Robert Slessor. He died prior to the taking of the census of 1851, which should have provided the location of his birth. There has been found no record of his death, so we cannot even surmise with confidence his approximate date of birth.

The only clue we have is that one Alexander Slessor was a witness at the christening of Mary's father in 1815. He may be one of two people. Either he was the Alexander Slessor resident in Peterhead at around this time, and who might be a brother of Robert Slessor senior, or he could be the Alexander Slessor who married Jean Gibson in 1776 and who had a son named Robert 'Slessor' born at Craighead of Skelmuir in the parish of Old Deer, Buchan in 1787. Indeed, this may be Mary's grandfather and therefore the witness, Alexander would be Mary's great grandfather. This is not established with certainty, however.

It is interesting to look at the life of Mary's father Robert Slessor from the perspective of the official records.

On the 1841 census he is recorded as living with his wife Mary on Ann Street, Old Machar (Aberdeen). His occupation is described as 'H L W L', ie, 'Hand Loom Weaver of Linen'. This seems strange given what is known of Robert Slessor.

On his son's christening in 1844 and on Mary Slessor's christening in 1848 he is recorded as a Shoemaker.

By 1851, on the census he is recorded as working as a 'Fireman'. This is not what it would mean today! In 1855, when Susan was born he is recorded as a 'Stoker'. In fact 'fireman' and 'stoker' are the same occupation. He is working shovelling coal into a steam engine firebox to keep it running. This is extremely demanding physical work.

In 1860, when his son Robert died he was recorded as a 'Mechanic's Labourer', and on the 1861 census he was recorded as an 'Engine Smith's Labourer'.

It may well be that he was in fact still working as a stoker and that his employer in 1860 and 1861 was the same. A 'mechanic' and 'engine smith' may be the same thing.

By the time of his death in 1870, however, he is again recorded as a shoemaker.

Much is made of Robert Slessor's apparent alcoholism and it is suggested that he 'lost his job' as a shoemaker because of it. I feel that this is somewhat unfair and probably not true.

In 1841 he is recorded as working as a hand loom weaver. This was a skilled occupation that would have required some training. In 1844 and 1848 he is recorded as a shoemaker. Again this would have required some training.

The important point to emphasise here is that at this date both weaving and shoemaking were cottage industries in decline. The industrial revolution was changing the country. Shoemaking in

particular was becoming centralised in factories in the Midlands of England, in particular in the towns of Northampton and Leicester. The cottage industry shoemakers were finding it increasingly difficult to compete with the manufacturers of these cheaper mass produced products and many found themselves unable to sell their shoes. A similar thing happened to the weavers.

So Robert Slessor may have found himself unable to work in the occupation he was trained for. This could have led to depression. Labouring as a stoker was very demanding physical work. It would be very hot working close to a firebox all day. He would certainly have had a thirst. There was no ready supply of clean tap water available, indeed alcohol was usually regarded as purer. So he may well have drunk a lot anyway.

This of course could have led to alcoholism about which nothing was known at the time and to associated domestic problems.

Towards the end of his life Robert Slessor is again recorded as a shoemaker. It is not clear whether he was in fact gainfully working at this time. He was certainly not working as a stoker. This was a younger man's occupation. It is certainly possible that he was recorded as a shoemaker as this is what he regarded himself as being.

So, Robert and Mary Slessor have no descendants living today.

Mrs Slessor, Mary Mitchell was an only child. Robert Slessor, however had a brother named John Slessor.

John Slessor died in the Old Machar (Aberdeen) Poor House on 19th December 1890. He was apparently 71 years of age. He was recorded as being the husband of Elspet Watt. His parents were recorded as being Robert Slessor and Jane McPherson. These are, of course the same names as the parents of Mary Slessor's father Robert. This John Slessor is then clearly her uncle as there certainly is no other couple of these names.

The person that registered this death was one Ann Urquhart of 52 Bridge Street, Aberdeen. She was described as a niece of John Slessor.

The precise nature of her connection was not at all obvious and took a little while to discover.

Robert and John Slessor would appear to be the only surviving children of their father Robert Slessor senior, but their mother Jane McPherson had an elder child, Margaret Grant who was born in the parish of Inveravon, Banffshire on 25th September 1805 and who was the child of one James Grant. This was the parish in which Jane McPherson was also born, probably around 1785.

Margaret Grant, Robert and John Slessor's elder half sister married Alexander Urquhart on 8th March 1827 in Inveravon and had four daughters, including Ann Urquhart who was born on 21st November 1832 in Keith, Banffshire. After her husband's death Margaret moved with her daughters to Aberdeen, where her mother Jane McPherson was living.

Jane McPherson – Mary Slessor's paternal grandmother was long lived. She died in Aberdeen on 7th November 1874, having outlived her son Robert Slessor by 4 years. Her death registration suggests that she was 92 at the time of her decease and that her parents were Duncan McPherson and Ann Christie.

The census records that Jane was born in the parish of Inveravon, and while a record of her birth has not been found, there is a record of a Margaret McPherson born to parents of these names in Inveravon in 1782.

No birth record has been found for John Slessor who would have been born circa 1819. John Slessor married his wife Elspet Watt at Old Machar, Aberdeen on 13th December 1845.

The 1851 census find's John and Elspet at Jack's Brae, Aberdeen. They have two children: Margaret aged 3 and John aged 1. Margaret was

born in Aberdeen, but John was born in Inveravon. This is a parish we have come across before as it was the birthplace of Mary Slessor's grandmother Jane McPherson. It is also the birthplace of John Slessor's wife Elspet Watt.

By 1861 things had changed radically. Elspet was living in Tomintoul in the parish of Kirkmichael, Banffshire. This is some distance from Aberdeen. She is recorded as being aged 37 and married – note, not widowed. In addition to her eldest children, Margaret and John, there are now three younger children: Jane aged 8, Francis aged 5 and Marjory aged 7 months. Jane was born in Aberdeen, but Francis and Marjory were born in Tomintoul.

John Slessor was eventually discovered to be living at Blairgowrie in Perthshire at this date (his name was recorded as 'Slicer'). He was boarding with an Irish family and working as a flax dresser.

So what was going on? The birth record of Marjory Slessor is interesting. It is recorded that she was born in Tomintoul on 2nd September 1860 and that she was illegitimate. John Slessor was not her father. The record also states that Elspet had not seen her husband John Slessor for two years.

Elspet later gave birth to another illegitimate child Alexander who was born in Tomintoul on 1st May 1867.

John Slessor on the next two census', for 1871 and 1881 is found living in the Aberdeen poorhouse. He died, as we have seen in 1890.

Elspet meanwhile remained in Tomintoul until the 1880s, when she moved to Aberdeen with her son Francis.

Francis Blaikie Slessor was married twice. He married his first wife Maggie Hay on 18th December 1893 at the Douglas Hotel, Market Street, Aberdeen. His occupation was commercial traveller (salesman). On census returns it is recorded that he was employed in the tea trade.

His parents were on that date recorded as being *William Slessor* a *Joiner* and *Elspet Watt*. This would appear to be incorrect as we know that *Elspet* was married to *John Slessor* who was a *flax dresser*.

When *Elspet* died in 1905 her son *Francis*, who registered the death, this time stated correctly that his mother's husband was *John Slessor*, but again recorded his occupation as 'Joiner'.

Francis Blaikie Slessor died in *Aberdeen* on 7th *March* 1933. He had married his second wife *Rachel Ann Esslemont* on 27th *February* 1909 at *Maryculter*. His widow this time recorded his parents as *John Slessor* a cabinet maker and *Elspet Watt*.

This is a little confusing. *Francis* was recorded as being aged 73 when he died in 1933, however on the 1861 census he was recorded as being 5 years of age. The earlier age is likely to be correct. This would put his date of birth at 1855/6. As Civil Registration began in Scotland on 1st *January* 1855, his birth should have been registered. However, it cannot be located.

All of these inconsistencies lead us to the conclusion that the paternity of *Francis Blaikie Slessor* is in doubt. Now, *Francis* certainly grew up without a father, and that may account for the mistakes on his marriage in 1893, when he said his father was a joiner named *William*. There is also then the question of where he derived his middle name from. Perhaps it was the name of a Godparent, or perhaps it was the name of his biological father!

There was a joiner named *William Blaikie* resident in *Aberdeen* during the 1850s. Perhaps he was in fact *Francis'* father and perhaps this is what led to the family break up. We do not know.

The paternity of *Elspet's* elder son *John Slessor* is not in doubt, however. He emigrated to the United States in the late 1880s and settled in *Ohio*. He married *Mary Jane Wright* soon after his arrival and with her had four children, all of who survived to adulthood and all of whom married and had families. Their descendants are probably

still living today, but have not been traced. John Slessor died in Rudolph, Wood County, Ohio on 1st September 1920.

Elspet and John's elder daughter Margaret Slessor has not been traced, but she had an illegitimate daughter Jane Slessor, born in Kirkmichael in 1870.

Similarly Jane Slessor, the younger daughter of John and Elspet and who was born circa 1852 has not been traced, nor have Elspet's younger illegitimate children Marjory and Alexander. It is possible that they died without issue.

Some of Francis Blaikie Slessor's descendants have been traced, however. Francis had a son Francis Blaikie Slessor junior by his first wife. He was born in 1893 and married Jessie Price in London in 1946. He died in Eastbourne, England in 1965.

Francis also had a daughter Margaret Esslemont Slessor who was born in Aberdeen in 1909. She married Thomas Somerville in 1936 and by her husband had four daughters: Gillean, Patricia, Joanna and Raonaid Somerville. All four were married and two of them: Patricia and Raonaid are living today. Margaret died in St Andrews in 1994.

Raonaid married Michael Allan Cobban in Edinburgh in 1971 and has been contacted.

The reader may be a little disconcerted by the knowledge that the paternity of Francis Blaikie Slessor, the grandfather of Roanaid Somerville and her sisters is in doubt. However, this story has an interesting twist to it.

Francis' mother Elspet Watt, we know from the census was born in the parish of Inveravon. We also know that this was the parish in which Jane McPherson, Robert and John Slessor's mother was born.

Elspet Watt's death registration in 1905 records that her parents were John Watt and Margaret McPherson. Elspet was baptised in Inveravon

in 1821. Her mother Margaret McPherson we have seen before. She was the sister of Jane McPherson.

So, Elspet Watt was in fact a first cousin of her husband John Slessor!

This means that *all* of her children - even the illegitimate ones - were closely related to Mary Slessor as Elspet was of course a cousin also of Mary's father Robert Slessor!

So, the fact that Francis Blaikie Slessor's paternity is subject to doubt is not really a problem at all, as in any event Francis was closely related to Mary Slessor through his mother.

Francis, if his father was John Slessor was a first cousin of Mary Slessor through him. He was at least second cousin of Mary Slessor through his mother.

So the Somerville sisters and their families are without any doubt among the closest living relatives of Mary Slessor today.