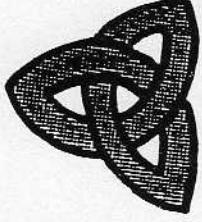


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EDITORIAL

Having for many years enjoyed the high quality of editorials penned by Duncan Ross, Jonathan McCoil and most recently Nick Lindsay, this time you are going to have to make do a substitute from the reserve team. This puts me on the horns of a dilemma. Should I make an effort to try to approach the high standard attained by the illustrious trio mentioned above, or should I produce something so dire that members will be queuing up in droves to volunteer to compose the next editorial to forestall a repeat performance in November?

So how does one go about filling the rest of what was not so long ago a blank page? First of all I believe you need a theme. My starting point is the fact that next month our Society will have been in existence for 25 years. This gives me the chance to reflect on the meagre facilities available to the amateur family historian in 1981 and how access to information has changed dramatically since that time, particularly over the past few years.

In 1981 the starting point for family history research in Scotland was New Register House in Edinburgh. Obtaining details of birth, marriage and death certificates at that time was very tedious. You consulted the heavy index books and when you had identified four entries you added your name to the bottom of a list. You then waited until it rose to the top and your name was called out by one of the assistants. Having shown him the details (year, parish and entry number) for the first certificate you were interested in, he led you up a winding metal stairway to the appropriate level. He fetched the required volume, opened it to the correct page and set it down on a table for you to copy out the details. He stood close by to make sure there was no peeking at the other pages! Once you had copied out the information you needed he went through the same procedure with the other three certificates. Back down on the ground floor you consulted the indexes once more, added your name to the bottom of the list and waited for it to reach the top once more. If you were lucky you might be able to record details from 16 certificates in a day.

It was not all doom and gloom then. Upstairs you could order a parish register or a census return and the relevant book was brought to your desk. There was no restriction here as to what you could look at. It was a joy to turn each page and see the full entry without, as happens today, having to dip your head into the bowels of a microfilm reader to look more closely at the film because the sun is reflecting off the screen and obscuring your view of what is written on the page. There was a certain extra excitement then as you were probably the first member of your family to find out who your great grandparents were, information you omitted to ask your grandparents about before they passed away.

All those years ago the family tree you built up from the information you gleaned at NRH was very often plotted on the back of a spare off-cut of wallpaper. It looked impressive at the time but, once you found another sibling you didn't know existed when you drew the first version, you had to add their name with an arrow pointing to their position in the family, or get another piece of paper and start all over again. 25 years later such additions to the family tree are no longer a problem. Now you simply feed your data into one of many genealogical software packages which will produce up-to-date reports or charts for you in seconds.

Today all forms of genealogical data are much more accessible than they were in 1981. With broadband access to the Internet it is possible for to sit here at the desk in my study and using the website *Ancestry* download digital images of, for example, the census returns for 1841 to 1901 for England, where my mother was born. I can also use websites like *GenesReunited* to make contact with others who are researching the same names as myself. Once we have discovered a distant relation, we can then use e-mail to transfer information between us. Where will it end and what will family historians be able to access in 25 years from now? This instant access to information seems so far removed from the first tentative steps I took when I first started researching my family history all those years ago.

MAJOR JOHN GORDON AND THE WIFE WHO NEVER WAS

By Alastair Gordon

A happy internet discovery has shed new light on my great great grandfather, Major John Gordon of the 2nd Foot (1782-1850). A cousin of mine found a reference to legal proceedings of 1829 between Major John and a Dorothea Christina Thomas, the mother of his natural son Surgeon-General Huntly George Gordon¹. It is an intriguing story.

Narrative

Dorothea Christina Thomas (known to Major John as 'Christina') was born in 1796 in Grenada in the West Indies and a Mormons transcript shows she was baptised at St George's there. Her father died while she was very young and she was brought up in Barbados and then in Georgetown, Demerara, where her mother Dorothy (nee Kirwan) owned considerable property. It seems that Dorothy (or Dolly), born in Montserrat, was a 'free mulatress', with an earlier son by Mr Thomas, so it is reasonable to assume that Christina was at least a quarter black. Dorothy's 1848 PRO will mentions several other children and a legacy to a grandson Huntly George Gordon.

Christina was sent to England at the age of about 12 for instruction in those accomplishments generally bestowed by parents in affluent circumstances upon their daughters' and then returned to Demerara. While still a teenager she had 'a disagreement with her mother, attended with peculiarly distressing circumstances, which induced her ... to connect herself with a person of the name of Garraway to whom she had a child' (a daughter). This is presumably the Ann Garraway Thomas who was baptised at St Michael's, Barbados, in 1816. During this period there was also a liaison with another man.

In 1816 the 2nd Foot were posted to the West Indies. Major John was stationed at Trinidad when his second wife died in 1817 but he was at Demerara by the end of that year. There, in 1819, he met Christina and they lived together for the next 2 years (she even prepared military reports for him). She later claimed that he had given her a ring as a pledge that he would marry her as soon as his military career came to an end - as 'a woman considered to be of colour' it would have been out of the question for him to have married her while serving.

In 1821 John was ordered back to the UK with his regiment and Christina followed him a few weeks later, setting up in lodgings in Glasgow at the end of July. On 2 August she gave birth there to a son, Huntly George. John visited her shortly after the birth and a few weeks later she joined him in Edinburgh, where they lived together again as man and wife during his period of leave. In June 1822 John was posted to Ireland with his regiment and on the way they had the baby baptised at St Mary's, Chester. She went on to Glasgow but at his request subsequently joined him in Dublin for a few months. John's letters show that he was devoted to the baby, more so indeed than to his other sons, John junior (subsequently himself a Major) and Edward Strathearn (subsequently Lord Advocate in two Disraeli Governments and later a Lord of Appeal).

John was forced out of the regiment in 1823 by its new colonel (Sir Henry Torrens, formerly Military Secretary at the War Office), apparently on grounds of ill health. The couple were back in Glasgow that autumn and were joined in their lodgings there for 3 weeks by her mother Dorothy. John had been looking at houses in Edinburgh and sought to secure from her mother a sum of £10,000 (including at least £8,000 cash down) as Christina's portion; he was clear that without a portion of this size they could not live satisfactorily as a married couple. However, in spite of his hint to Christina that he might be able to obtain a larger sum from another source, an offer of only £5,000 was forthcoming - and Dorothy returned to

Demerara. John was disappointed and bitter about this, but he continued to live with Christina as man and wife in various lodging-houses in Edinburgh from May 1824 to April 1826, she apparently meeting many of the household's expenses. The landladies, servants and shopkeepers could all testify that the couple shared bed and board and that she was known by all - and addressed by John - as Mrs Gordon. However, it was observed that they did not go out together, even to church, and that, when John had parties of his male friends to dinner, she remained out of sight. Certainly John's friends did not consider him to be married to her, and one particular occasion is reported when their landlady referred to his wife and he indignantly denied having one.

Some time in 1826 John became acquainted with Mrs Jessie Drysdale (nee Sceales), a widow who had two sons and an income of £300 a year (broadly the equivalent of a capital sum of £10,000), and by September it was 'all settled' that it was her that John would be marrying. For Christina the only question now was whether John would make her an adequate allowance for the maintenance of Huntly George. A draft deed was therefore prepared which presumably would have guaranteed her as reasonable an income for this as John could manage, in return for her officially renouncing any further claims on him.

At this stage things turned nasty. A lawyer told her that, though she and John had never gone through any church ceremony, the fact that they had lived together for so long as man and wife might mean she could prove a marriage by 'habit and repute'. When she revealed this idea to John, he terminated their correspondence abruptly with an extremely rude letter. Both parties then brought actions in the courts - John applying for a Declarator of Freedom (freedom to marry someone else) and Christina for a Declarator of Marriage on her own behalf and Legitimacy on behalf of Huntly George (in the light of the latter action the Freedom case was formally suspended). The Edinburgh Sheriff Court decided the Marriage/Legitimacy case in John's favour and in July 1829 Christina's appeal to the Court of Session was likewise rejected. Before July was out, John had married Mrs Drysdale.

Commentary

The case was subsequently cited in the law books as setting a precedent on what was needed to prove a marriage by 'habit and repute'. The main point that won John the Court's decision was that, whatever the views of the landladies, servants and shopkeepers, it was the failure of his military friends and people of a higher social status to recognise Christina as his wife which made all the difference.

John was attractive to women and a serial husband. Two years seems to have been the maximum he could face without a woman to live with. That was the interval between the death of his first wife and his second marriage, and between the death of his second wife and his taking up with Christina. She is said in our family to have been dark and beautiful. Her being of black descent does not seem to have been a significant factor in John's final decision to look elsewhere, and I am inclined to feel that it was indeed only the failure of her mother to put up as much as £10,000 that stopped him from making her his wife before all the world. Apart from the last one all John's letters which are exhibited as evidence in the case are very affectionate. Huntly George was recognised by John as his son and was fully accepted by the Gordon family; neither his own origin nor a messy divorce and subsequent remarriage to a woman who was herself illegitimate could stop him from rising to one of the top posts in the Army Medical Department.

The Napoleonic Wars gave John and his three brothers (Lt Adam of the Cape Regiment, Captain William of the 2nd Foot and the Portuguese service, and Captain Thomas of the 1st Foot) the chance to escape a subsistence life in Sutherland and rise in the social scale. John was regarded as a highly competent and efficient officer (he was appointed Deputy Assistant Quarter Master General in the West Indies) and all but one of his military promotions were

