

## Kirkcaldy Civic Society – The Boy on the Train

Many are aware of this evocative poem, which tells of an excited young boy, making the journey to Kirkcaldy to visit his Grandmother. It highlights his seemingly never ending questions and captures his breathless comments on what he sees. The pace and style of the poem induce the reader to believe that they are in the carriage, watching and listening as the story unfolds. The poem concludes with the boy knowing that his destination is approaching as, “fine I ken by the queer like smell – the next stop is Kirkcaldy”.

In its heyday, the town floored the world and the sweet smell of linseed hung thick in the air. The queer like smell was synonymous with Kirkcaldy and this poem cemented the town, linoleum and the smell into the public consciousness.

As well known as the poem is, it raises many questions. Who was the author and when was it written? What prompted the idea of the poem and what was the author’s connection with Kirkcaldy?

The writer was Mary Campbell Smith (nee Edgar) (1869 – 1960) and it is generally accepted as being written in 1913. The roots of our quest lie in the Stewartry of Kirkcubright. Both Mary’s Grandfather and Father were Ministers of the Church of Scotland, in neighbouring parishes. Her Grandfather, Samuel Cowan in Kelton and her Father, Andrew C. Edgar in Tongland.

In 1865, Andrew married Samuel’s daughter – Mary Sybil Cowan. Andrew was 15 years senior to Mary. Their first child was born in 1867 and by 1874, another four had arrived. Five children were born in Tongland, named Andrew, Mary, Campbell, John and Charles. In 1874, Rev. Edgar translated to Mauchline in Ayrshire, which was once the parish of Robert Burns. The family continued to increase, with the births of Jane, Sybil, Madeline and Audrey. Audrey was born in 1883 which means, that in 16 years, Mary Sybil Edgar gave birth to nine children. The 1881 census shows the family having three servants –a nurse, a housekeeper and a cook.

The nurse Elizabeth Armstrong features in the census disclosures of 1871, 1881 and 1891. It seems that she followed the family from Tongland to Mauchline and then further afield.

Mary, the second born, is our subject - Mary Campbell Smith (nee Edgar). In this brief history, most of the siblings play no part but Jane, John, Madeline and Audrey occasionally feature.

Born on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1865, we know very little of her early life. The 1881 census shows her as a 12 year old scholar and by 1891 her circumstances had changed dramatically. This change was brought about by the death of her father in March 1890. Although he died in Ayr, his normal residence is noted as The Manse in Mauchline. It is safe to assume that this was still the family home, although that was about to change. The Manse would be required for Andrew's successor. The 1891 census, shows a move to a substantial dwelling at 23 Dalrymple Crescent Edinburgh. In the years since the 1881 census, a number of the children have flown the nest. Mary S Edgar has become the head of the household, replacing her late Husband.. Mary Campbell Edgar is still living in the house and the two youngest children, Madeline and Audrey are registered as scholars. The servant count is now down to two. Elizabeth Armstrong, who has been with the family since at least 1871 is now the housekeeper, as a nurse is no longer required. We also learn that the Mary Cowan, mother of Mary Sybil and grandmother of the three children is also registered, aged 82. What is interesting is that Mary Campbell Edgar and her mother are "living from private means." Given that Mary went from being a scholar to living from private means, offers no clue as to whether she was ever employed.

The position exposed by the 1901 census tells us more. If 23 Dalrymple Crescent was a substantial home, then 36 Fountainhall Road in Edinburgh was more opulent. Mary Edgar remains the head of the house. Son John, is registered but given he is a soldier; it is possible he is only home on leave. Jane is noted as being a teacher of cookery and the two youngest children are recorded as a student and a scholar respectively. Mary Campbell Edgar has gone and also Elizabeth Armstrong, the long serving housemaid / nurse seems to have also left. The servant count is now down to one.

Mary had been married in 1895 and we can now start to move onto her later life and the story behind and of the poem.

On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1895 Mary marries George Smith. The ceremony took place in Fountainhall Road and was conducted by the Rev A Cowan. It would be difficult to believe that the surname is a coincidence and that the minister was not a relative. Jane Edgar is a witness.

George Smith hailed from Ayr and attended Ayr Academy before entering Edinburgh University to read Classics. From there George continued his studies, being admitted to Oxford University in November 1887. He was a member of Trinity College and gained first class honours in Classical Moderations in 1889 and in the First Honour School of Classics (Literae Humaniores) in 1891. The Degree of BA was conferred on him on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1892 and an MA on the 1st June 1895. In any circumstance this is a glittering educational achievement and one that placed him on a sound footing for the future. George, on leaving Oxford, secured in 1892, a teaching post at the prestigious Rugby School. He was at Rugby when he married Mary in 1895 and his bride joined him in Warwickshire. The Couple remained at Rugby until 1898, by which time George had risen to a Housemaster. This period saw the birth of their first two children, a boy George Alan Campbell Smith and a girl, Mary Sybil Smith. In 1898, George Smith took up a post as Headmaster at Merchiston Castle School in Edinburgh. The Rugby school magazine "The Meteor" praised him highly for both his educational ability and his personality. His decision to take up his new post was brave, given he had big shoes to fill. His predecessor, a Dr Rogerson had been in post for 35 years and remained as Chairman of the Directors until his death in 1903.

We now come to the genesis of the poem, with the building blocks now in place. The new school and their preferred holiday destination were the catalysts which shaped "The Boy on the Train." The family had been completed by the births of Christopher in 1902 and Hilary in 1908. The 1911 census shows the family together in School accommodation, bar young George, whom we know to be a boarding pupil at Rugby. There is a surprise however, in that Jane Edgar, sister and witness is now registered as a servant. Ten years earlier, in the 1901 census, her occupation was – teacher of cookery.

The family holiday was normally taken on the Fife coast at Elie. The train was the transport and it was one of these journeys which nurtured the idea of the poem. The "boy" must have left a strong impression on Mary, given how much of what he said stayed with her. It is not known if Mary produced the poem at that stage. We do know that the trigger came from some Merchiston Schoolboys wanting to produce their own magazine. They asked Mary for a contribution to the first edition and she supplied "The Boy on the Train". The magazine entitled "The Total Eclipse" saw only one edition and no copies are left in existence. The total eclipse, of 31<sup>st</sup> August, might have inspired the title. This is where luck came to the rescue, in the shape of the editor of the official school bulletin (The Merchistonian). Learning of the "Total Eclipse" he reviewed the magazine and was highly impressed by the poem. This in turn, led to his reprinting the poem in the school bulletin during 1913. There can be no definitive date as to when the journey took place or when the poem was written but it is probably safe to assume, it was close to 1913. The "Merchistonian" had a far reaching circulation amongst, pupils, former pupils and parents. This wider circulation initially propelled the poem into the public consciousness, eventually leading to its publication in anthologies of Scottish verse. It would seem that any poetry written by Mary was for her own amusement and interest. Only one other poem can be traced by the Scottish Poetry Library and that is "Miss Mirren McKie" This comic poem is written in broad Scots, which tells us how well Mary could adapt from what must be presumed as her natural mode of speech.

The following year saw Smith resign and move to Dulwich College in London as Master. No reasons are given for the move, in the archives of either school. Once again, a glowing tribute is paid to Mr Smith and mention is made of the support of Mary. Dulwich offered a fresh challenge, especially as his four predecessors had no knowledge or practical experience of running a school.

George is in post as Master of Dulwich for another fourteen year spell, before he leaves to take up a post at his old university of Oxford. Once again we find glowing tributes being paid to George. Mary has some slight mentions in handing out prizes for endeavour in sport and education. She is also mentioned as doing good works with the Dulwich College Mission. All in all, her 14 years as the Master's Wife remain all but unrecorded.

George was appointed Director of Education at Oxford, a position he held from 1928 until 1937. Given in that year he had reached “three score and ten” he retired and the couple continued living in Oxford at 10 Lathbury Road ( a highly prestigious address). George lived until 1957, dying at age 90, on the 27th January. “The Times” carried a glowing obituary to a man who was certainly a giant in the educational field. The report carried by “ The Times” of the funeral, shows an imposing collection of the great and the good, with representatives from all the establishments, with which he had been involved. Surprisingly, the widow gets no mention in the funeral report. “ The Times” obituary merely mentions Mary, as being the daughter of Rev. Andrew Edgar. His net Estate was £25,000.

It appears that Mary lived very much as the support of her husband and in truth, her life was his life. Mary appears to have been a background figure, almost in the shadows. Mary lived until 1960, dying in Oxford on the 6<sup>th</sup> March, at the age of 91 (estate value £35,670)

Nothing suggests that Mary every set foot in Kirkcaldy, only passing through, stopping at the station to let the “boy” alight. But there is a connection – albeit tenuous, in fact very tenuous. Her marriage certificate shows the Registrar as being a William Kirkaldy!!

The Smiths had four children in total. The eldest daughter, Mary Sybil Smith, had a distinguished career at Oxford. Little else is know about her, other than in 1931 she emigrated to America.

Christopher P.C. Smith the younger boy also studied at Oxford where he gained a double first. After a brief spell teaching at Westminster School, he became an Assistant Master at Rugby in 1926, staying until 1938. In that year, he took up the post of Warden at Trinity College Glenalmond, in Perthshire. This was a very testing time, with all the issues which war time brought. He was recognised as working tirelessly in the interests of the school. To this end, he was greatly, aided by his parents moving north to keep house for him. This “allowed Christopher to devote all his energies to the school.” George Smith further assisted his son by teaching classics. Mary is noted, as planting rhododendrons in a border, where they remain to this day.

The couple must have made an impression on the pupils, as George received an obituary in the School Magazine – “The Glenalmond Chronicle”. However, Mrs Smith’s death in 1960 only merited a notice of the death. Christopher’s crowning glory during that period, was organising the delayed celebration of the School’s centenary. In this connection, the then Queen Elizabeth, joined the celebrations in 1947.

In 1948 requiring a change after the strain of the war years, Christopher moved to Haileybury and Imperial Service College, as Master. In 1962, he hosted the centenary celebrations of that institution and once again, Royalty was present, in the shape of the present Queen Elizabeth. Very few, if any Masters, will have celebrated the centenary of two schools during consecutive appointments, especially in the presence of the Queen. He retired to St Andrews, dying in 1984. He died in bed – his breakfast tray by his side.

Christopher leaves a clue as to his Mother’s ability to use broad Scots. He tells us that his Father always enjoyed recounting Scottish anecdotes and that his Mother had referred to a relation as a “wallydraigle” – so perhaps the language of her poems was much more familiar to her, than would first be imagined.

The youngest child Hilary Annot Smith again studied at Oxford where she met Ronald Groves. The couple married in 1939. Groves was another distinguished academic, teaching at King’s College Canterbury. He left that position in 1943, to be Headmaster at Campbell College Belfast, staying until 1954. In that year he took up the post of Master at Dulwich College (following in his Father in Law’s footsteps). He retired in 1966. He was involved with many national bodies, including being Chair of the Food Standards Agency (1959 – 1962). He died on the 13<sup>th</sup> February 1991. The death of Hilary on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 2006 marked the passing of the last of the immediate family. The couple had had two sons and the value of Hilary’s estate was £1,518,226.

It is not possible to leave the story without thinking of the pupils who passed through George and Mary’s hands between 1895 and 1918. So many of them enlisted and fought in the Great War, some never returning.

Their sorrow at those losses would pale by comparison to the grief they would feel at the loss of their eldest son George. George, who was the first born child, had left Rugby at Easter 1915 with a Classics Scholarship for Trinity College. However, he immediately took a commission with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. After training he went to France. In September 1916 he was promoted to Captain. In November of the same year, he won the Military Cross. The citation read that he “led a daring raid against the enemy with great courage and determination.” George returned to England in November 1917 but was back in the field by May 1918. On September 28<sup>th</sup> 1918, he was killed by a shell, whilst leading his platoon into action. His Memorial contains lines from Robert Browning’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra” – the lines being chosen by his Father. He was 22 when he died.

It is unusual for the principal figure in a researched narrative to stay in the background to such a degree. Even by 1957 standards, it is quite astonishing that Mary warrants no mention in the obituaries of her Husband. Setting aside her famous poem and her long life, almost nothing tangible can be traced of her. A life of service, together with the accomplishments of her children would seem to be her memorial.