

James Harrison White (1848-1913) and Mary Bowie (1844- 1932)

1. Consumption in the tenements – Partick. April 1865

In the close confines of a two room flat, the coughing never stopped. The noise put Mary McGregor on edge. She was only twenty years of age and her parents had taken their toddler out for the day so that she could nurse David. For a young man of twenty-one, he had a waxy pallor, and sat propped up in bed. A massive bolster cushion was at his back so that he might breathe more easily. He looked towards the chimneybreast wall and smiled at his glass mirror. It was a glass mirror that he himself had made, for he was a glass cutter by trade. His brother John stood by the window looking towards the river, and wondering if his younger brother would ever rise again. He turned and smiled thinly.

“So have you heard the news then, David? The word in the yards is that there will be no more blockade-runners coming out of the Clyde. They say that the Confederacy is nearly beaten. There’s more than one ship-owner wondering if he can cancel or change his order.” John was a carpenter in the Stephen yard across the river, and was keenly interested in the health of the industry. It could pitch him out of work at any time.

John cleared his throat. It was more painful each day. The chest pains had become huge cramps and for the past weeks he had been spitting up more and more blood. His cough was getting worse too. He had suffered chills and sweats and had lost almost a stone in weight. He had had no energy for months and been in bed for the past fortnight.

He wondered, not for the first time, how a young healthy man could be so stricken. He had heard it said that families suffered, but here it seemed to be the tenement. Maybe the place was cursed. There was no treatment. Either you lived or died. For the wealthy there was now the new option of sanatoriums built in places with clean air, but even this was no guarantee of survival. In Partick, where the grime of industrial Glasgow was all around, a river view was just about the best that you could hope for.

Mary was small and determined, with her hair pulled back into an auburn brown bun. She had not left his side for weeks, and had been supported in this by both families. She brought a bowl of broth over to the box bed and a linen cloth to cover his front.

Just then the door reverberated to a heavy knock. John McGregor walked to the door, and let Mary’s father, James Bowie into the room. He carried a wicker basket of food, sent by his wife. He looked what he was: a blacksmith. Years of shoeing horses in Dunblane had given him huge forearms and if he had now converted that skill into making boilers then the same metal working skills continued to serve him well. James had ridden the industrialisation of his country well. He had moved from the country to the city, and honed his skills on the way. He no longer worked metal for agriculture; now he forged iron for the great shipyards of the Clyde.

With him came his granddaughter. Jane Niven McGregor was a precocious two. Quickly her uncle John threw her up in the air and caught her as she fell back into his

arms. There were screams of delight. Even her father smiled to see her energy and happiness.

“Well Mary, there is enough here to keep you going for a few days. Your mother has been baking today. And how are you feeling, David?”

He coughed twice with a handkerchief to his mouth and smiled as best he could. “I think I’ve turned the corner, and hope to be getting up next week.”

Notes

1. Tuberculosis or “consumption” caused the most widespread public concern in the 19th century. It was an endemic disease of the urban poor. In 1815, one death in four in England was due to it. In the 1850s the wealthy began to use sanatoriums for the disease, but one in two was still dead within five years in these institutions. It was not until 1880 that opinion realised that the disease was contagious.
2. Even today TB is a major global health risk. In 2004, there were 14.6 m chronic cases and 1.7 m deaths. In Britain, the disease was making a come-back with 6000 cases.
3. When people suffering from active pulmonary TB cough, sneeze, speak or spit they risk passing the disease. Contracting TB requires prolonged or frequent contact and the estimated infection rate is 22% with family members. That is why certain families were avoided as being consumptive in the nineteenth century. Equally it was why the Glasgow tenements and their dense living conditions were so dangerous.
4. David McGregor, glass cutter, died aged 21 on 20 April 1865 at 118 Castlebank Street in Partick.. He had suffered from consumption for one year. His brother John registered his death.
5. Jane Niven McGregor was born in 1863. We do not know what happened to her. She either died, but probably not in Scotland, or was brought up by her relatives or was placed for adoption. We just don’t know what happened to her. It may be that she moved to Bowie relatives in England or abroad. When Jean Niven Bowie died in Renfrew in 1877, her husband James Bowie seems to have left Scotland as an old man – he would then have been over sixty – certainly there is no record of his death here. This hints at some Bowie relatives outside Scotland and it would be nice to think that they might have looked after young Jane.

Fig 1: The Death certificate of David McGregor. He died in a Partick tenement of TB in 1865

01/01/1865 MCGREGOR, DAVID (Statutory Deaths 646/02 0177)

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1865. DEATHS in the District of Parish in the County of Lanark

No.	Name and Surname, Rank or Profession, and whether Single, Married or Widowed.	When and Where Died.	Sex.	Age.	Name, Surname & Rank or Profession of Father, Name, and Maiden Surname of Mother.	Cause of Death, Duration of Disease, & Medical Attendant to whom certified.	Signature & Qualification of Informant, and Residence, Ward of the House in which the Death occurred.	When and Where Registered, and Signature of Registrar.
175	Edward Mulligan	1865 April 22nd 2nd at scotland	M	4	Thomas Mulligan Quarryman	Scorch'd 3 weeks	Thomas Mulligan at scotland	1865 April 20 th at Parish
					Martha Mulligan M. Barber	On medical attendant	James Slater Librarian Registrar - M. Barber	James Slater Librarian Registrar - M. Barber
176	Margaret Brown Reid	1865 April 22nd 2nd at scotland	F	34	John Reid Bridgesman	in Glasgow - 6 weeks	John Reid Brother	1865 April 20 th at Parish
					Marion Reid Mrs Morrison	at scotland - 6 weeks		James Slater Librarian Registrar - M. Barber
177	David Macgregor	1865 April 22nd 2nd at scotland	M	21	William Macgregor Shipbuilder Lanark	Consumption 1 year	John Macgregor Brother	1865 April 22 nd at Parish
					Margaret Macgregor Mrs Stewart	On medical attendant		James Slater Librarian Registrar - M. Barber

By John Macgregor, Registrar

2. The Irish arrive – Broomielaw, Glasgow. June 1867

James White stood at the prow of the SS “Penguin” as she nosed her way up the River Clyde. The river was busy, and the dredged channel not overly wide, so her skipper was paying great attention to the pilot who was guiding her into the quay at the Broomielaw. The banks of the Clyde had looked surprisingly attractive with fields and orchards stretching down to the water, but increasingly these were disappearing under the grime of shipyards and industrialisation. The closer to Glasgow he got, the greyer the scenery became. He looked up and to his left, he could see the great stone blocks of the merchant city rising in parallel rows from the river and covering the slopes until they met and marched over the top of Blythswood Hill. Straight onwards he could see the smoke of a thousand chimneys belching out from mills and mines and the poor tenements of the east of Glasgow. Already the tenements had closed in on the river, north and south, with Govan to the south and Partick to the north.

James thought of his little hometown of Cavan where, for better or worse, everyone knew everyone. He thought of his father in his cabinet-maker’s workshop, and his elderly aunts. When he got established, he would write and explain. For an Irish immigrant, he was notably well dressed. He wore a suit of Donegal tweed, and it was sufficiently worn to be almost comfortable. He had a black bowler hat, the first he had ever owned, and a black silk tie went well with his cotton shirt. He was just eighteen years of age. Educated at the Royal School in Cavan, his father and aunts had entertained high hopes for him as a Minister of the Presbyterian religion, but it was never his ambition or intention, and now it had ended in a huge argument. He had packed his bags and gone to join some Cavan contacts in Glasgow. He was set on obtaining an apprenticeship, and making his own way.

James turned back and looked at the deck of the “Penguin” as whole families emerged into the pale sunlight. The ship was carrying nearly a hundred passengers from Belfast to Glasgow, though her normal run was down to Liverpool from the Clyde. It was profitable taking people and goods across the Irish Sea and the G & J Burns fleet was one of the most active. There were some large families, and by their dress they were farm workers from the small farms of Donegal and Tyrone. Equally there were groups of single men, who might send for their families in due course. There was even a smattering of suits like his own.

He wasn’t sure if he would get a welcome from his old school friend, David Sheridan when he landed, but he had written to say that he was on his way. David’s father had moved to Glasgow to work in the shipyards as a wright, and with luck would help him. He had the address in his pocket.

He smiled as a girl with dark hair approached him. She looked almost Spanish in the way that some of the Irish did. She wore a shawl around her shoulders.

“I’ve just come to say good-bye Mr White. We’ll be docking soon, and then it’s off to Dundee. I hope that you find your friends, and get set up.”

He touched his hat to her. “I wish you well, Miss Hayes. I’m sure that I’ll find a position here. Good luck over in Dundee.” He could see her father looking over and frowning. She smiled again and was gone.

The ship bumped against the quayside and huge ropes appeared to bind her to the land. A gangplank was produced and the passengers began to crowd by her port side. There were another three ships from Ulster ports tied up nearby. On the Broomielaw, a mass of people, bags, goods, cabs, carts and animals jockeyed for position. James looked down, threw his bag over one shoulder and advanced. Nobody said, "Welcome to Scotland" but he had his contacts and knew from his history lessons that in one sense he was going home.

Notes

1. The SS "Penguin" was owned by G & J Burns, which was a well known Glasgow shipping company. Two brothers, whose father had been a prominent Minister of the Barony church in Glasgow, founded the company in the mid nineteenth century. Tod & McGregor of Meadowside, Partick built the ship in 1864. She was a single screw steamer, which started her working life on the Clyde to Liverpool route. Later, she sailed on the Glasgow to Belfast crossing. In 1878, the "Penguin" was sold to the Union Steam Ship Co of New Zealand. Sadly, she sank in 1909 in the Cook Strait with the loss of seventy-five lives.
2. It has been estimated that the Protestant Irish, like James White, comprised about twenty-five per cent of all Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century Scotland. Professor Tom Devine notes that the Irish Protestant migration to Glasgow was predominantly from the northern counties of Antrim, Down, Londonderry and Armagh, whilst the Catholic migration was from more rural areas of the north of Ireland like Donegal and Cavan. Having said that there was a significant Protestant population in Count Cavan, and had been since 1600. The Protestant population of what became the Republic of Ireland i.e. the twenty-six counties, has declined from about 300,000 to 100,000 since partition in 1921. When James White left Cavan town, the Protestants would have been a significant minority of the town, perhaps approaching a third of the total.
3. James Harrison White was born around 1849 in Cavan. His mother, Jane Harrison, died young. The family legend has it that elderly aunts, who were keen that he should become a Minister, raised him. His marriage certificate in 1869 does show that his mother was deceased but his father was still alive. He was equally keen that he would not join the Ministry, and left Ireland to get a trade on the Clydeside. As far as we know, he never returned to Ireland.
4. James White was reputedly well educated to the age of eighteen. The Protestant school in Cavan town is the Royal School, Cavan. It still exists, and is still under a Protestant board of management. It was founded in the early seventeenth century, and is based in a large Georgian building.
5. Discrimination against the Irish of Catholic affiliation as "aliens" was practised by employers and by the craft associations that controlled the apprenticeships that led to better paid, skilled work. The Protestant Irish certainly fared better, having close social and cultural ties with the Presbyterian Scottish population. Equally many skilled men came to Glasgow from the Protestant areas of Belfast to work in the Clyde shipyards. Against this, the Catholic Irish "navvy" was a valuable if not always valued resource, but they frequently started from a poorly educated, rural, background.

Fig 1 : Broomielaw, Glasgow about 1870.



3. The Kaiser's Navy – 947 Govan Road, Glasgow. October 1892

“Well it’s good to be back,” said James White as he sat down in his favourite chair. It had not seen him for a full year. “I’ve brought a present for each of the children, young or old! The Germans are great toy makers, especially in wood. You should see their shops.” Eight of their nine children were present. Only Helen who was a housemaid was not present.

“What have you brought me Daddy,” lisped Maudie. She was six years old and as bright as a button. Her hair was tied up in bunches with tartan ribbon in honour of their returning father.

“Well, they are all in this canvas bag,” said James opening it up. In no time the parlour floor was covered in paper. It was the sort of fancy wrapping paper that wasn’t seen very often in Govan, even in this prosperous tradesman’s house, with its two bedrooms and a box room. It was distinctly foreign. So were the presents, which ranged from a carved bear for Maud, through to a white Meerschaum pipe for Henry, aged eighteen.

“Now children, give your father some peace. Go and show the presents to your friends but be back for tea at five o’clock please.” As one, the children vanished and the room returned to tranquillity. Mary produced cups of the tea for them both, and they sat on either side of the fire. Normality was restored.

“These Germans really know how to do things,” said James. “The new Blohm & Voss yard is quite something. It puts Fairfield to shame. It is a brand new yard and already expanding. These Germans might be short of skilled men but they will take some stopping now they have got the production line flowing. All the German shipping lines are placing orders. Not only that, but I spent the last few months working on the engines of a German warship, the “Condor”. We held classes in the evenings for the new workmen coming into the yard, and these people learn quickly I can tell you. I liked them too, well most of them. Mind, it’s good to be home. You never really know what a man is really thinking if you are speaking in a foreign language.”

“James, we have a bit of a problem. Helen came to see me last week. She is pregnant.”

There was along silence.

“Do we know who the father is?”

“She won’t say, and by the look of her, I’d guess that he’s in no position to marry her.”

Again there was silence.

Mary leaned forward, and said, “I was talking to her, and I think the best thing would be for us to bring up the child. That will leave Helen to find her own life.”

“Are we not a bit old for that?”

“Well, I’m forty-eight, and you’re younger. Alexander is only four, so it won’t be so strange. This way Helen can re-build her life, and we can see that the baby has a good home.”

“Maybe I should have brought another present?” James paused. “If that is the right thing to do, then that is what must be done.”

Notes

1. James White, as an engine fitter in the shipyards, took short-term contracts around the UK. Several of his children were born in England, and he also worked for sometime in Dundee. Family legend has him working in Hamburg for the Blohm & Voss yard on a contract.
2. Hermann Blohm and Ernst Voss began their shipyard in 1877. This was six years after the unification of Germany. At first, despite having worked in both Germany and Britain, they struggled to make the yard viable. A lack of men skilled in building large-scale iron ships was a major obstacle at the outset. By the late 1880’s they had succeeded in convincing German ship owners that they did not have to go to Britain for the best ships. In 1892, the Imperial Navy ordered their first ship, a small cruiser, from the yard. This was the “Condor”
3. Meerschaum is a soft white mineral found in large quantities around the Black Sea, and sometimes even found floating on the sea itself. It is said to resemble sea-foam, and thus derives its name from the German for sea-foam. The Germans have imported it for centuries from Turkey, and a tradition of carving elaborate pipes developed. James may have brought back several pipes, as we still have one today.
4. Helen White gave birth to Alfred Clark White on 24 May 1893 in north Glasgow. The boy was raised as if he was the youngest son of James and Mary White, his grandparents.
5. In 1917, Alfred was the fourth (engineering) officer on SS Waverley in the Mediterranean when a German U Boat torpedoed her. Alfred and many of the crew were drowned. It would be nice to think that the submarine did not come from the Blohm & Voss yard. The name of Alfred White appears on the war memorials at both Linthouse Church and Govan High School.

Fig 1: Census return for Govan 1891 – White household.

They had been baking, and neither Mary nor either of the daughters, Maud and Georgina had had any cause for alarm.

“Whatever is the matter,” said Mary.

“I’ve just come from the Trades Hall. From the class. A fellow came in and shouted that there had been a disaster at Ibrox. At the Scotland-England game. A stand has collapsed. There are hundreds dead and injured he said.”

The atmosphere went from relaxed to fraught in a second.

“Which of the boys has gone to the game?” said James urgently.

“Well I think that Noble and Alfred were planning to meet Henry there. And of course they’re with John. Georgina’s here to help us with the baking and young Jo is lying down in the back room.”

“There are crowds coming along from the direction of Ibrox. I’d better go and see if I can find them. I’ll be back as fast as I can.” With that, James turned to Mary, gave her a hug and set off.

The women looked at each other and Georgina, who had only been married to John Beck for three years, went to the window to look out to see if she could see her husband and three brothers. There were already little anxious crowds forming at the entrances of the stair closes, where they entered the street. Small groups of men and boys stopped as they came back from the game. People asked them had they seen their friends and family. Usually the answers were brief and in the negative.

“We’ve got to go down and ask folk,” said Maud. “We just can’t stay in the flat.”

They got their coats and hurried to the street level. Disconsolate men came walking past, hands in their pockets, heads bowed. There was no one who they recognised, and then suddenly two neighbours came past. They shook their heads. No they had not seen the boys.

Meanwhile, James was cursing to himself. Why hadn’t he gone with the boys? Was his regular adult reading class at the Trades Hall more important than staying with the family? He pounded one fist into another as he neared the ground and the crowds got thicker. Already there were ambulances taking away the injured, and he even saw an omnibus crowded with walking wounded. He approached Ibrox from the west and could clearly see a section of the west terracing which seemed to be twisted and did not sit properly. They were expecting nearly 70,000 people at the international, but the ground was almost new. What had happened?

He stopped a man and asked what was happening in the ground. Could he get in?

“You’ve nae chance,” said the man.” The police and a’ sorts are carting folk out of there. There must be hundreds dead or injured. You’ve never seen anything like it. The west terrace just buckled and broke, and a damn great hole appeared in it.

Hundreds disappeared into it. And ye ken, it must be fifty foot or more down through the stanchions onto concrete. It was horrible.”

James heard this, but his brain was in a whirl. He headed for the gate at the Broomloan end. It was open and a sea of workers and officials were coming and going. He grabbed a stretcher and entered the ground with it on his shoulder. Handing it on to another chap, he made his way round to the pitch where the injured were sitting and a row of dead had already started to accumulate. He made his way around the row without recognition, and then on to the injured. He didn't want to interfere but he must know. He saw Peter Davidson, a shipwright, with his arm in a sling.

“How are you Peter?”

“I'm fine, but they say that I must go to the hospital and get my arm checked. I think I broke my wrist when the crowd surged away from the hole in the terracing. Would you tell Lizzie what's happened, and that I'll be home as soon as I can?”

“Depend on it Peter. You've not seen my boys have you?”

“Not at all, James. I've been here almost an hour now, and I don't think they were around here. I hope not.”

James re-traced his way towards the Govan Road. It was another twenty minutes before he got home.

As he opened the door of the flat, there was silence and then he heard Noble telling the story of what they had seen. The boys were fine, but it was the first and only time that anyone had ever seen James Harrison White cry.

Notes

1. On Saturday April 5, 1902 Scotland met England for the twenty-seventh time in a football international. The Ibrox football ground had been re-built in 1899 for £20,000 and the expected crowd was 68,000. About 4pm, part of the western terracing collapsed towards the top section. The part of the terracing which collapsed had never in the past seen such a crowd. The crowd was stamping and swaying. Some witnesses had heard a crack before the fall, and the footboards split. Below them, seventeen joints had given way. The concrete base had vertical steel girders set into it. Horizontal steel girders, and a lattice of supporting struts supported the terracing. The result of the collapse was that hundreds were precipitated to the ground, and the scene was appalling. It has been estimated that some three hundred fell through a huge hole, and then plummeted forty or fifty feet. They landed on the metal girders and then the concrete floor.
2. Twenty-five people died in the disaster and somewhere over five hundred were injured. All the fatalities were male, and the majority came from Glasgow, although one lived in Aberdeen and another in Crieff. Many of the deceased worked in the nearby shipyards of Govan.

3. After the disaster there was no inquiry held. Instead, the contractor was sued for negligence as it was said that the timber supplied for the terrace was of inferior quality to that specified in the contract. One immediate impact was that terracing for standing, in Scotland, ceased this form of construction. In future, terracing on which crowds stood and moved would be built on a solid bank and not elevated like a stand where people sat.
4. The Workers' Educational Association was founded in 1903. However, there had been a long tradition of adult classes on the Clydeside aimed at improving literacy levels. This was especially a problem with Irish immigrants, as the school board system of Scotland had done a fair job since 1870, and many of the unskilled labourers at this period were Irish. James White is known to have taught in the adult literacy programmes, and devoted much time and enthusiasm to it. He had been raised with the expectation of becoming a Minister and as such had benefited from schooling to the age of eighteen. He was also Irish.
5. The account of the Ibrox disaster is as told to me by my grandmother who was the baby asleep in the back room in this story – Jo, or more fully Joan Stuart Hastie Beck. I hope that she will forgive me for certain embellishments.

Fig 1: Mary White nee Bowie, formerly McGregor. Taken with great grand-daughter, Sheila Sutherland Thomson in Govan in 1925.



Fig 2: Family of James Harrison White and Mary Bowie.

Descendants of James Harrison White

