

John McLaren Adamson (1808-1869) and Jean Bell (1822-1905)

1. The Christening -- 23 June 1811

Even in June, the climate of Fife can be an uncertain business, and this day was no exception. Dark clouds promising rain scudded across the sky, and the coal ships on Torrie Bay pulled hard at their anchors. Torryburn village was set back from the shore, a few hundred yards from where the Torrie Burn empties into the Firth of Forth. It was a small place of perhaps forty or fifty cottages, with a newly rebuilt church, proud of its hexagonal bell tower, and a pier for the export of coal and salt. Beyond it stood Torrie village, even smaller than Torryburn, otherwise known as Newmills, hunched under the brow of wooded cliffs by the seashore. The parish of Torryburn numbered about 500 souls, almost all of who could be accommodated by the new church, although this was rarely the case.

The population earned their living from the several small pits behind the villages, the salt-pans in Torrie Bay, the hand-loom weaving of linen and damask, farming; and the export of the coal and salt by half a dozen coastal brigs. It was on these ships that many members of the Drysdale family worked, with most of the small ships in the Bay being crewed by members of this large family.

The common ancestor of the Drysdales was Thomas Drysdale who had married Janet Walker, and had three children. Adam was born in 1738 and married Margaret Thomson in Inverkeithing in 1762; William (B 1740) who married Catherine Cunningham in Dunfermline also in 1762; and Elspeth who was born in Dalgety in 1747. Adam's family worked many of the ships, and his oldest son, also Adam Drysdale was at that moment at sea as captain of a merchant ship sailing to Canada. William's family also found their living on the brigs in large measure, and with four sons and four daughters, William's family were well known in the village.

At the centre of a small procession, just entering the church was one of William's daughters. Jean Drysdale was thirty-three years old. She had married in October 1802, John Ellis, a mate on one of the coal brigs, and then a petty officer sail maker on one of His Majesty's warships. The peace of Amiens had brought John Ellis home at the age of twenty-eight, and by the October he had married Jean who was twenty four. However, the peace with France did not last and by May 1803, John Ellis and the British fleet were back at war. In early September 1803, a baby girl, Jean, was born but she was sickly and died. Whilst Jean stayed in Torryburn, weaving and looking after siblings' children, John was shuttled from ship to ship, as Britain maintained a blockade in the Channel, and sent fleets to the Mediterranean. And so the years went past.

From 1803, as demand for coal grew steadily; the old bell pits behind the village of Torryburn, in the direction of Crombie, were linked up by extensive working; and tunnels spread out in all directions, some only a matter of a few feet below the surface. A number of miners were engaged by the factor of the Torrie estate, and among these was eighteen-year-old Alexander Adamson from Fordell Muir in the parish of Dalgety, some eight miles to the east. Alex was one of eight brothers of a mining family, and took lodging with Jean in the village.

On the 14th of January 1808, a son was born to the couple, John McLaren Adamson. There was nothing that could be done to hide the awkwardness of the situation. Alex could not marry Jean – she was already married. The Minister was outraged, and the family shamed. The Drysdales however counted for something, and Jean and the boy attended church however censorious was the Minister. Alexander Adamson returned to Dalgety and married Agnes Clark in November 1809, but she died in childbirth, shortly afterwards.

Pressure was brought to bear on the Minister, and so in June 1811, the Drysdales proceeded into the church of Torryburn for a christening. The laird of Torrie, General Sir William Erskine was away in Spain fighting with the British armies (he committed suicide in 1813 after a nervous breakdown), and was not an issue, and the Minister was loath to offend the Drysdales.

At the door of the church, half a dozen Adamsons, with Alex at their head, met the Drysdales. Little was said or acknowledged.

Inside in the dark of the church, the service proceeded at speed. The Minister enquired of Alexander Adamson whether he acknowledged the boy as his own.

“Ye ken it fine”

“ What names are to be given to the child?”

Jean replied. “ He is John McLaren Adamson”

“I will require to enter this in the Register”

“Write what you please, Minister”

The little boy, three years old, was duly baptised, and looked at the two opposing groups of adults with his blue eyes and fair hair in curls. They parted at the door of the church: the Drysdales turned left for the village, and the Adamsons right for Crombie and Inverkeithing. Alex smiled briefly at Jean. “Bring the boy to see me sometime?”

“You know I will” she replied.

Meanwhile in the vestry, the Minister was writing. At the top of the page headed “Baptisms 1808”, between the heading and the first entry on January 3, he entered:

“Alexr’ Adamson and Jean Drysdale had a son born/begot in fornication. Bapt’d 23 June 1811. John McLeren Adamson”

He looked down and pursed his lips. It really spoiled the look of the page with its nice spacing and handsome copper plate writing.....

Notes:

1. In 1814 John Ellis, master sail maker, came home from the Royal Navy. On January 16, 1817, he and Jean had a second daughter, Mary.
2. On Sept 24th 1832, Jean Drysdale died in Dunfermline, aged 54. There is circumstantial evidence that her husband, John Ellis who had become a tailor in Dunfermline, survived her.
3. In May 1833, John McLaren Adamson crossed the Forth to Edinburgh, and enlisted in the Royal Marines. He was then a collier – and reduced his age by one year on the papers. It seems likely that his enlistment was connected to the death of his mother, for whom he may have been providing for.
4. Mary Ellis married James Hoggan, a tailor and preacher, on April 27 1839 in Dunfermline. They had six sons between 1841 and 1860 in Dunfermline, and she died there in 1866, aged 49. On her death certificate there are full details of her father, John Ellis, but a blank where details of Jean Drysdale should have been entered. Was there an estrangement between John Ellis and Jean Drysdale, or did the Son in Law, James Hoggan, simply not know the name of his mother-in-law, or as a lay preacher did he not approve of her? She had only been dead six years when he married Mary Ellis, her daughter.
5. Alexander Adamson was born in the parish of Dalgety in 1788. He married Helen Penman in 1814 and had twins with her in 1815, Alexander and Christina. In 1819, he had a further son Andrew. Helen had died by 1841, and possibly much earlier. Alexander died in 1870 in the hamlet of Masterton, three miles south of Dunfermline and about five miles from Torryburn.

Fig 1 : The birth records of Torryburn Parish, Fife. This records the birth of John McLaren Adamson in 1808 and the subsequent christening in 1811.



Parish of Tomycorn

County of Fife

Baptisms 1808

Jan^r 11th *John Adamson and Jean Drysdale had a son born bapt*
of Fordyce, bapt 23rd June 1811, named John M^r James

Jan^r 23rd *David Sprouald & Catherine Kemp-*
seed had a son born, bapt named Samuel

Jan^r 4th *Andr^s: Chalmer and Ann Black-*
had a son born, bapt 28th named John

July 5th *James M^r Queen and Marg^r: M^r:*
Queen had a girl born bapt 28th named Jean

Feb^r 14th *John Husband & Marg^r: Thomson had*
a son born, bapt 7th named Robert

10th *Rob^t: Cunningham & Misere*
Justie had a son born, bapt named Rob^t:

Feb^r 8th *David Grieg & Christiana Robert-*
son, had a girl born, bapt 21st named Elizabeth

John Sommerville & Helen Polson
had a son born, bapt

Nov^r 15th *Mrs^s: Paterson & Charlotte Hill*
had a son born, bapt named George

Jan^r 12th *John Ritchie and Susannah Irvine*
had a daughter born, bapt 25th named Mary

The above particulars are extracted from a Register of births & baptisms dated 23. 6. 1811

Given under the Seal of the General Register Office, New Register House, Edinburgh on 4 May 2000

2. Bombardment of Acre -- 3 November 1840

For the third time, John Adamson shifted the worn leather stock round his neck, and wondered why he was still sweating in the early morning of 4th November. The battle had gone well for the British and their Austrian and Turkish allies. A strong fleet of 21 ships including four of the new steamers had bombarded the citadel of Acre into submission the previous day, and now the British had heard that the Egyptian rebels were evacuating this last base on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. So all across the bay, as dawn broke, small ships boats packed full of Royal Marines were being rowed across the few hundred yards to the ancient Crusader town of St Jean de Acre. Already several gates had been seized by the red-coated marine infantry, which every

ship carried. HMS Castor, 36-gun frigate, Captain Edward Collier, had thirty of these sea-going soldiers apart from the normal ship's complement, and they had already proved their worth at the seizures of Haifa and Tyre in September. Now they were being rowed across to the town in two boats, not including the Jolly Boat, which had been damaged by cannon fire in yesterday's action, which had also killed four seamen, and badly wounded two marines and another sailor on the Castor.

John watched as the boat in front reached the quayside, and Captain Collier led fifteen Royal Marines onto the dock, and formed them up with the help of Sergeant Dawkins. Lieutenant Morton sat in the front of this boat and slowly turned his sword back and forward as the sailors slowed the approach of the boat to smoothly put her alongside the jetty. John glanced down at the musket in his hands – all dry: good.

Yesterday, the bombardment had ended when a British shell had exploded the magazine of Acre in the citadel, triggering a massive explosion. Adamson could only imagine what had happened to the Egyptian defenders with their French officers when it blew up. This had been the breaking point for the army of the rebel Egyptian Pasha, Mehmet Ali who had seized Syria and Palestine from the Sultan of Turkey. Why Britain and other countries wanted to help Turkey and the Ottomans against their own rebel citizens was well beyond a private of the Royal Marines, but they did, and so here he was. It was a long way from auld grey toon of Dunfermline. But here he was.

Up onto the jetty and they formed ranks smartly under the experienced eye of Collier, and the nervous glance of their own officer Morton. Captain Edward Collier was fifty-seven years old and had joined the navy in February 1796 at the age of thirteen. An experienced officer, he lacked connections and indeed had been twenty-five before making lieutenant; but he had then quickly progressed with the opportunities of all out war against France. He was a Commander in 1810, and a Captain in 1814. And after the long years of peace, he was still a Captain. Morton on the other hand was twenty-two and yesterday was the first time he had seen men die in action.

At the double, the Marines made for the small postern gate leading into the old town from the back of the jetty. John found himself in the next to back rank as they doubled towards the small gate, which hung ajar. In went Collier and the first of his men. Over the gate was an Arabic inscription, and John thought of the scroll of writings from the Koran, which he had purchased from a mendicant in Tyre. It was on the Castor now. He had asked what the strange script had meant, and was told that it was blessings from the Koran for those with a charitable heart. “There is one God and he is good,” the man had said to him.

A few paces from the wooden gate and he would be into Acre. Then a small explosion and dust and debris and then silence. He looked through the gate into a small lane, and twenty yards beyond several men lay in strange tangled shapes and Collier lay on the ground. A small mine had exacted some revenge for the destruction of the citadel.

Notes:

1. John McLaren Adamson, 37th company, Chatham Division, Royal Marines had joined HMS Castor in 1837 and he served on her for four years, three months and nineteen days, as attested by his discharge papers.

2. He was awarded both the British campaign medal for Syria, and also the Sultan's own medal for the siege of Acre awarded by Turkey to members of the fleet who took part in the action, as recorded in the Admiralty papers held in the Public Record Office. The medals were bronze for other ranks, silver for officers and gold for the Captains. The Sultan's medal has a green and pink ribbon, and a picture of the citadel of Acre on it. The medal was either lost or pawned in the 19th century, but "an other ranks " bronze Sultan's medal was re-purchased in 2006.
3. The logbook of HMS Castor records that two marines were permanently invalidated out as result of the naval action of 3 November. These were Thomas Newdick (who lost an arm), and William Bailey who suffered leg wounds. In addition four seamen died on that day being John O'Brien, Fred Weaver, John Smith and Thomas Silneck. Three more died of their wounds later. On the morning of 4 November, the landing party of HMS Castor was blown up as it entered Acre. " The only untoward incident was another explosion in which several men were killed and Captain Collier of the Castor was severely wounded."
4. John McLaren Adamson did purchase an illuminated scroll of sayings of the Koran in 1840. It exists still, and was translated in the 1970s. It is written in red, black and green inks on a long scroll of paper – more than fifteen feet long.
5. Captain Edward Collier survived Acre, and recovered from his wounds. He was awarded the Companion of the Bath (C.B) for his actions in the campaign. He became a Rear Admiral in 1850, and a Vice Admiral just before he retired from the Navy in 1857 at the age of 74. He was actually promoted to full Admiral whilst retired in 1862, and died on 5 August 1872 aged 89.
6. The Castor retired to Malta for repairs after the battle.
7. Mehmet Ali's revolt against Ottoman rule of Egypt came to an abrupt end in December of 1840, after the action at Acre. A peace treaty was signed which recognised Mehmet Ali and his heirs as hereditary rulers of Egypt, providing they withdraw all forces from Syria and Palestine, and return all Turkish ships held in Egyptian ports to Constantinople. Within a few months John McLaren Adamson and HMS Castor were back in Britain.

Fig 1: Account from a Naval History of role of HMS "Castor" and Captain Edward Collier at the taking of Acre in 1840.

so far was acting as a reserve, to anchor ahead of him, and this did at least do something towards filling the unintentional gap.

On the south side the *Castor*, *Benbow* and *Edinburgh* anchored towards the middle of the front with the smaller British ships to the west of them and the Austrians about the angle, while Walker in the *Mukadim-i-Hair* with the *Wasp* not far from him took his place as near the inshore end of the line as he could go.

Firing began about two p.m. and went on for nearly three hours, until a shell, probably fired by the *Gorgon*, caused the main magazine of the fortress to explode with devastating effect, killing more than 1,000 men in its vicinity. After that the Egyptian fire slackened and soon ceased altogether. Towards sunset Stopford signalled to discontinue the engagement, but Napier in the *Powerful* continued firing until after dark, when the flag lieutenant brought him orders to withdraw. His ship was sufficiently injured aloft to have to be towed out by the *Gorgon*, but the *Revenge* and *Princess Charlotte* went out under sail. The *Thunderer* and *Bellerophon*, farther to the north, stayed where they were and the ships of the southern division did the same.

The loss of the allied fleet was very slight, only 11 killed and 42 wounded, while the Egyptians are said to have had some 300 men killed, apart from the victims of the explosion. Some ships, the *Powerful* in particular, had suffered considerable damage aloft, but none was seriously disabled. The garrison had not expected the ships to come in so close and had continued to fire high when the smoke prevented them from seeing what their guns were actually doing. The *Powerful* had received only 3 shots in her hull and had no casualties.

During the night the garrison began to evacuate the place. Walker discovered this in the small hours and at once passed on the information and landed a small body of men to occupy the nearest gateway in conjunction with a landing party from the *Guerriera* under the Archduke himself. Other parties followed and Acre was soon completely in allied hands. The only untoward incident was another explosion in which several men were killed and Captain Collier of the *Castor* severely wounded.

After this the bulk of the fleet returned to Beirut, but the *Castor* and *Wasp* were sent to Malta for repairs, the *Benbow*, *Magicienne* and *Daphne* to Alexandretta, the *Hazard* to Tyre and the *Pique* and *Stromboli* left at Acre. The Turkish flagship was also sent back to Constantinople and Walker followed her in the *Vesuvius*. Napier in the *Powerful* left Beirut

Fig 2: The ship's log of HMS "Castor" at the taking of Acre 1840. It records in detail the names of those killed and the damage done to the ship. Probably written by Captain Collier just hours before he was badly wounded by a concealed bomb as he entered the town.

H. M. S. Sultan

Continued from 2^d Tuesday 3^d Nov^r 1840

off the West-Batteries when a General
 Cannonading commenced & a Heavy-
 Explosion of Powder was observed to take place
 in the Town - & the Batteries being silenced
 discontinued the Engagement per Signal
 killed John O'Brien, Fred Peavee John
 Smith & J^o Silcock (Seaman)

Severely Wounded J^o Newbick (Royal Marine)
 Mr Bailey and J^o Wash (Seaman)

Found J^o & J^o booms with Gaff shot away -
 Bowprit fore yard & Main Top-Mast & Fore Top-
 of Mast badly wounded with 18 Shot in
 different parts of the Hull some very bad and
 J^o the boat stove & running standing rigging
 and sails much cut up -

Shifted the Fore Top-sail & J^o boom employed
 another & splicing running & standing rigging
 burned the men killed in the Action

Look from J^o the boat base back & in 2^d
 boats masts two in 2^d to number one in 2^d
 yards two Boat Hooks two Rowing Stations
 two Boat Sails two Rowing one Insign one
 Pend-out one Fore & Main Sheets back tie
 & whip. Mizen & Mainyard & back Haul

Watch Group & J^o refitting rigging

Mid. 2^d
 11

Fig 3: The Sultan's medal presented to members of the British Fleet by the Sultan of Turkey in thanks for the taking of Acre in 1840.



Fig 4: The extracts from the Koran . The writings were purchased by John McLaren Adamson whilst with HMS “Castor” in the Mediterranean Sea in 1840.

في الاغنياء الذين
 المشهورين وليست لهم
 من بعد حوزهم انفس
 وامرهم من صفات
 قال رجاله من الذين

العالين	لبراهمة
الرفيع الترمك	وهي الله على
سيدنا محمد	الحمد لله
تجارب ان	ويعا له
بلد بالتمام	وصحبه وبلد
والكمال	اما بعد
وهو حزين	وهو محب
وامان من	عظيم انان
القرناء	والبهات
المسدود	التوابع
الرمك والصد	من الخوف
الحواريف	الاسنى
ان ثا انه	رب والظن
بقائي لوصف	بان والفتن
الراس	وهو يافت
والرماني	والعيني
والرصد	والرميد
ان واني	السؤال
صداء و	الصغرة
الامراس	والدوخ
والدجيم	ولو حيم
ولو حيم	الاذناني
الديف	وقتل ال
وانه يفتي	طرافي
والطحال	ولو حيم
وعنيف	القتل
النفوس	والسؤال

حوا والظن
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