

Introduction: An ordinary Scottish family – sixteen Victorian lives.

A thought struck me forcibly when studying history. It is the voices of the rich or famous that normally speak to you. In the first place there are any number of books and articles on the innermost thoughts and feelings of the famous. This is supplemented by the writings of those who could afford the time to record their feelings, and by definition this normally means the wealthy or privileged. However, these only ever represented a small minority of the population. What did the ordinary folk think and feel?

I was lucky to have known all four of my grandparents and three of them well. Each was fond of telling stories of their families and the big events that had impacted them and their kin. I have stored those memories for nearly fifty years. Very often, they would discuss their families in great detail, and this often harked back to their grandparents. Perhaps we can only really pass on reliably stories of a couple generations back, but I can certainly recall little snippets, which come from my grandparents about their grandparents. In other words it may be possible for ordinary people without recourse to archives to reach back to their great-great-grandparents. This is certainly true with the advent of the Internet, and the ability to check facts and look at birth, marriage and death records, as well as the census returns from 1841 until 1901.

It also occurred to me that my sixteen great great-grandparents gave a very good cross-section of working class society in Victorian Scotland, and indeed were pretty representative of ordinary British folk as a whole in the mid and late nineteenth century. Among the men, we have a soldier, two coal miners, a game-keeper, a house painter turned ship's painter, a coachman, a small time farmer squeezed off his land and onto the railways, and an engine-fitter in the shipyards. The women often worked before marriage as domestic or farm servants, or in industrial concerns. They saw or were close to extraordinary events which include the seizure of slave ships, the launching of the "Cutty Sark", mining accidents, a future prime minister at close quarters, a disaster at a football ground, the rise of the German shipbuilding industry, and the suppression of an Islamic revolt. More than this they navigated the joys and despairs of ordinary life.

I was keen not to write a standard family history but something, which, in a sense, brought them back to life. I wish that they had the time or the inclination to write diaries but this would have been a luxury to them. I wish they had taken more photographs, although we have some. We also have a surprising number of physical objects from those times. So, I decided to write fictional accounts, which allowed them to speak and to some extent represent what I know of their personalities and the situations that shaped them. However, in each case, these fictional accounts were to be based on hard fact. Accordingly I have buttressed each story with footnotes, which serve to show what is fact and what is fiction. In writing in this fashion, I have been constantly surprised how accurate and true the stories, which sat in my mind, turned out to be.

Curiously, these people came back to life as I thought about them and researched their stories. I am glad that I have written them down and thereby passed on something of these long dead people. They were not grand people; indeed, they were far from it. They do however represent vast majority of the Scottish people who did not have servants or money and lived potentially tough working lives, as generations had done before. I suspect that my sixteen are neither more nor less interesting than anyone else's in an average Scottish family. They do however tell an important story from an angle experienced by the many but not often expressed. Consequently, it is a perspective on the nineteenth century, which is fast disappearing, as we move steadily into the twenty-first.

Fig 1: The eight great grand-parents of John McLaren Adamson 1921-1988

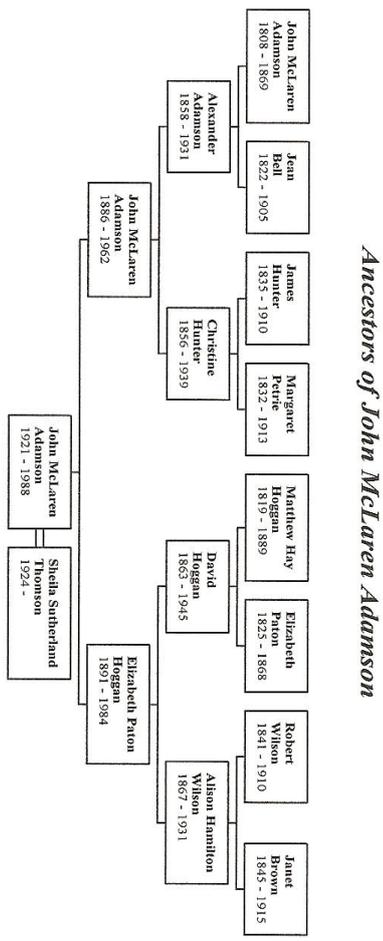




Fig 2: The eight great grand-parents of Sheila Sutherland Adamson

