

Ancestral Portrait Engravings

by

Penny Pirie-Gordon



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THE FIGURE first caught my attention a few years ago. The number of people in North America who were researching their family history or intended to start research fairly soon was, according to the survey, around 54 million, and the majority of these ancestor hunters, it was claimed, linked back or hoped to link back to the British Isles. Many of them hoped to cross the Atlantic to visit the places their forefathers had lived and then to imagine what the surroundings must have been like before the internal combustion engine was invented. They wanted to travel back in time and to dream. But what, I wondered, was there here for them, apart from photographs and videos, that they could take back to North America together with the memory of their dreams?

From occasional meetings in antique shops I learned there was a demand for “anything, really” that might be connected “with my great-grandparents”, even, on one memorably grey morning in Glasgow, “with my great-great-great-grandparents”, and although for most there was only a very small chance of finding something tangible associated with their families, the search would continue until perhaps an amateur artist’s watercolour of a local

scene was found and packaged for its journey to Alberta or Arizona. Luckier ones might find a porcelain plate or a silver bowl decorated with the arms of an ancestor; the further they had dug back into their origins the luckier they might be, for the chances obviously double with every generation as additional family names enter the lineage with every marriage.

However, two awkward problems interrupt their hopes at this point. The first is cost: armorial porcelain and armorial silver tend to be beyond the budget of the average ancestral tourist. The second is demand: the great surge of interest in family history prompted by the capabilities of the Internet and fostered more recently by the promised revelations of DNA research has created a huge market for ancestral mementoes, one in which the potential demand far outstrips supply. But there is, as many readers will know, a potential solution to this twin problem, one most ancestor hunters will find ideal, and this lies in the low cost of the many antique portrait engravings still to be found in attics and auctions, in junkshops and at specialist dealers, in secondhand bookshops and at antique fairs.



The Baronage Press has a database holding the description and location of more than ten thousand names of 18th and 19th century ladies and gentlemen who sat for portraits for which engravings were later produced, and, as many of these had more than one portrait painted, and have more than one engraving to their name, details of more than twenty thousand pictures are listed. To this database are now being added descriptions of armorial porcelain and armorial silver known to be coming onto the market, but in this present article I wish to concentrate wholly on portrait engravings. So let us look at this picture of George Jamesone, the portrait artist known to some, somewhat controversially, as “the Scottish Vandyke”, and let us see where it leads.

George Jamesone was born in Aberdeen, in 1588 or 1589, and died there in 1644, having married on 12th November 1624 Isobel Tosche. How many descendants does this marriage have today? I don't know, but seventy years ago a group of researchers listed about nine hundred of them, so a count now might produce around two thousand names — of which perhaps one thousand should be alive and thus perhaps potential buyers for a portrait engraving of their distinguished forebear. What would they have to pay for it? Perhaps only £65, and then mounted and placed inside a good frame it would be hanging on their wall for a total cost of perhaps £95.

What then? Well, quite a lot actually. There is an obvious pleasure in having an ancestor in the house. The picture can be a source of delight for children once they understand its significance, and as they grow older they can join the fun of hunting for their distant cousins. The researchers seventy years ago found George Jamesone's contribution to the survival of the human race included Belgians, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Russians and Swedes in addition to the more readily expected Scots, English, Irish, Canadians, Americans and Australians, and among their grandchildren now scattered across the globe but accessible by Internet will be many who will wish to share with their kin their interest and their pride in their ancestry.

Additionally, there is the satisfaction to be won by researching the time and place in which the portrait's sitter lived. Almost all who recognise George Jamesone's name today will say, "Ah, yes, the artist, Scottish wasn't he?" and we perhaps cannot expect many of his descendants to know more of him than this. But he lived the last years of his life in troubled times, and as a Royalist loyal to his friends, and as an Aberdonian loyal to his city, he suffered for his opposition to the Covenant. In 1639, when Aberdeen faced inevitable bloodshed from invasion by the Covenanters, the city fathers sent him to seek help of the Earl Marischal, a mission that labelled him forever as an enemy of the Covenant and of its successor, the Solemn League and Covenant, and led subsequently to his

incarceration in Edinburgh in the Tolbooth, close to where his granddaughter's grandfather-in-law, Sir John Gordon of Haddo, was later judicially murdered as a Royalist.

The circumstances of his death are obscure. He was almost certainly in Aberdeen in July 1644 for the birth of his youngest child, Mary, and in mid-September Montrose, who had become a Royalist, invaded the city, which by then had been forced to accept the Covenant, and his merciless highlanders slaughtered every man, woman and child they found in the streets and all the men they found in the houses. Family tradition holds that George Jamesone, who is known to have died before 11th December, perished during the massacre. Of his five sons and four daughters only three daughters survived him, and of these only two, Marjorie the eldest and Mary the youngest, had children.

Marjorie married John Alexander, an Edinburgh lawyer who was well-positioned to help his father-in-law while he was imprisoned; their son John was an engraver; his son Cosmo John was a portrait painter who produced also historical scenes; Cosmo John's daughter was Isabella who married Sir George Chalmers of Cults, Bt, whose family had lost its heritage and who in consequence studied painting under Ramsay and became a successful artist. The only known children of the next two generations were two officers in the Royal Navy, and the line appears then to have become extinct.

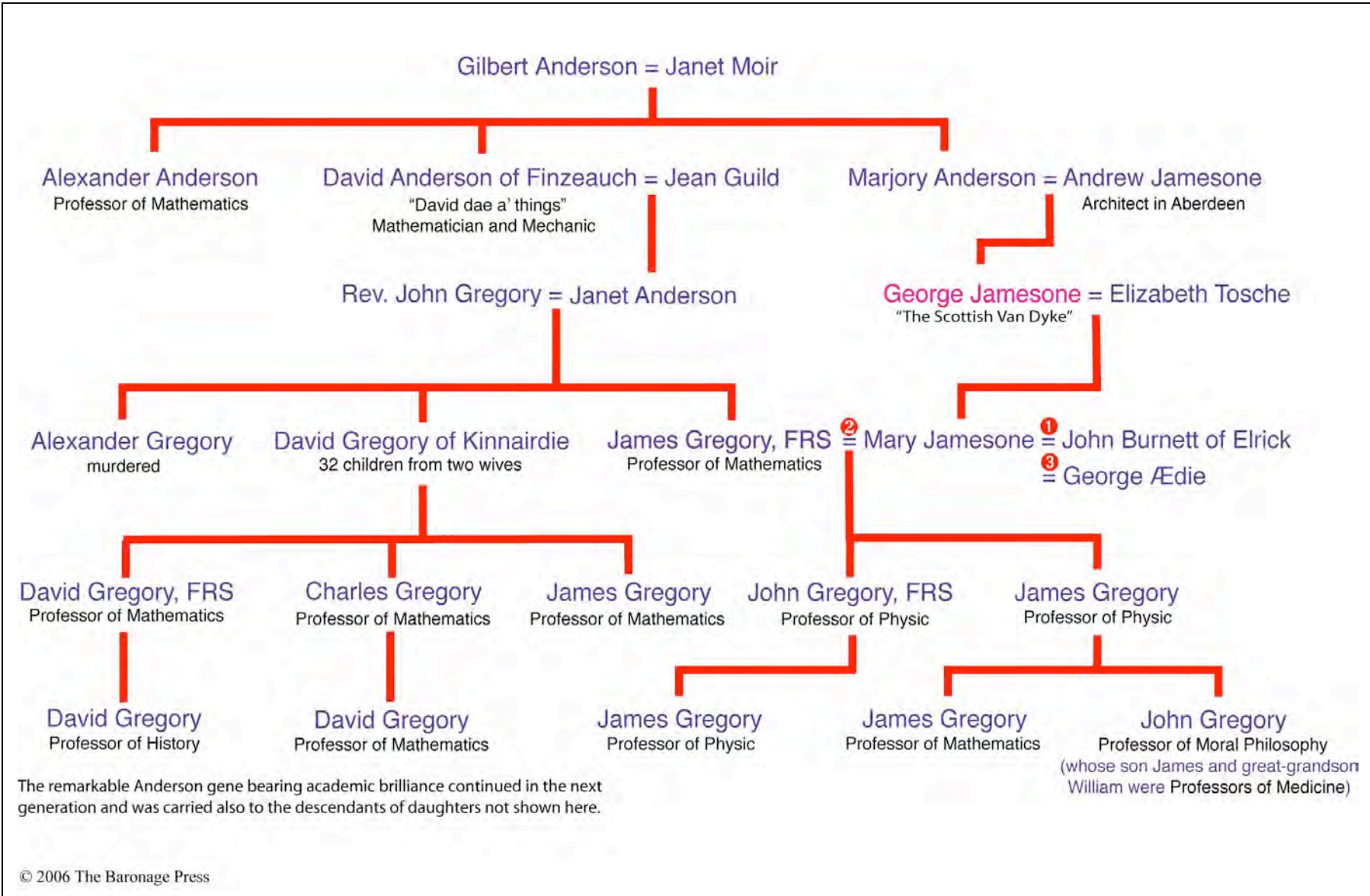
Mary's descendants, in contrast, flourished — and their daughters married into some interesting families which, owing to their eminence or to their forefathers, provide fascinating material for genealogical research. Among the Scottish landed families whose ancestry may be found by combing the reference books, and whose names jump out from the list of Mary Jamesone's descendants, are Burnet of Elrick, Garden of Troup, Lumsden of Belhelvie, Fergusson of Craigdarroch, Leith of Fyvie, Stirling of Kippendavie, Thomson of Portlethen, Skene of Rubislaw, Ross of Tillycorthe, Forbes of Waterton, Arbuthnott of Balglessie, Carnegie of Lour, Davidson of Tulloch, Bannerman of Elsick, and Gordon of Manar. There are many more, but I wish here only to indicate the scope for interesting research rather than to publish an inventory.

An alternative or additional pursuit can be the collection of short biographies of those cousins whose fame or success has appeared to justify their composition. A selection of Mary Jamesone's descendants in this category may seem to feature in a wide range of activities, but such variety is not uncommon. A quick browse reveals several officers of high rank who helped build the Indian Empire; Sir Archibald Alison, Bt, the historian, and his son General Sir Archibald Alison, Bt; the 14th Lord Dormer and his successors; Richard Bertie, 9th Earl of Abingdon and 14th Earl of Lindsey; Lady Gwendeline Bertie who married Sir Winston Churchill's brother John;

George Duff, Captain of *HMS Mars*, killed at Trafalgar, and his son Admiral Norwich Duff who fought also on *Mars* with his father; Prince Cléon Rizo-Rangabé, the Greek diplomat, poet and author; and Prince Constantine Lobanov-Rostovsky, the first commander of the Russian Air Force. There are also a holder of the Victoria Cross, James Forbes-Robertson of the Gordon Highlanders, many who fell in war, and many more who led uneventful lives (some of whom may be researching their family history).

Among the descendants who married famous or eminent men are Vera Griffith-Boscawen, the first wife of Sir Henry "Jock" Delves Broughton, Bt, the man acquitted of the murder of the Earl of Erroll in Kenya's "Happy Valley"; Eliza Skene whose husband was Charles von Heidenstam, the Swedish diplomat; Zoë Skene who married the Rev. William Thomson, Archbishop of York; Edith Bruce the wife of Captain Robert Falcon Scott, R.N. "Scott of the Antarctic"; and Helen Amy Lumsden who married Air Chief Marshal Sir John Maitland Salmond, R.A.F.

Those who enjoy the study of how characteristics may be handed down through the generations will be intrigued by the alliance of the Jamesone genes with those of the Aberdonian Anderson and Gregory families whose relationships are illustrated on the next page, Mary Jamesone, whose paternal grandmother was an Anderson, married her second cousin James Gregory, whose mother



was an Anderson, and their children demonstrated that same academic brilliance as her husband's Gregory nephews. These intellectual achievements continued in the generations that followed, and like the ones included in the diagram they tended to be on the scientific side.

However, the artistry gene of George Jamesone was not lost. His daughter Mary is believed to be the designer of four large and splendid embroideries still hanging in the vestibule of the Church of St Nicholas in Aberdeen, the artistic descendants of her sister Marjorie have been mentioned earlier, and several research papers have commented on the high level and frequent occurrence of artistic talent, usually professional, to be found among George Jamesone's descendants — these including not

only painters but also poets and authors, such as Dame Louisa Innes Lumsden, and the much-loved actress Ann Todd (of *The Seventh Veil* and *The Sound Barrier*).

In composing this article, and in choosing a portrait engraving of George Jamesone to illustrate it, I have used a man born into an ordinary family to demonstrate how widely our family relationships spread, and how unsuspected is their variety. I have tried also to show that an ancestral portrait engraving is not just a picture on a wall, and nor is it just a conversation piece that can help fill a gap during the desultory chat of a dinner party. It is a gateway to both the past and the present, an heirloom for the future, an excuse to explore the life of our forebears, and a bridge to distant kinsmen. It is heritage made visible.

Notes —

1. Penny Pirie-Gordon, who supervises the heirloom database at The Baronage Press, is the granddaughter of Harry Pirie-Gordon of Buthlaw, the noted genealogist and heraldist who in 1937 edited the great Centennial Edition of Burke's Landed Gentry (2,800 pages of heraldry and family histories in small print in a single volume).
2. The Baronage Press may be visited online at <http://www.baronage.co.uk> and enquiries about antique portrait engravings may be made on the form at <http://www.baronage.co.uk/registration.html>

