

Learning from the Past: The Life and Adventures of Mr George Robertson Nicoll

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‘Archives inform the future by helping us to learn from the past’, so argues John Pelan writing in this journal in 2018.¹ His words have particular resonance when we consider the potential contribution that family history stories have to make to our understanding of the past. This article explores one such family history story, that is, the story of George Robertson Nicoll (1824–1901). Born in Dundee, he followed his father and grandfather into the blockmaking trade and at the age of twenty-two married Sarah Baird, a linen power loom weaver from Errol in Perthshire. Like many others before and after him, George and his young family became part of the mass exodus of people which characterised the nineteenth century, as Scots headed to the new colonies in search of fortune. What makes George Robertson Nicoll’s family history story noteworthy is firstly, that he kept a journal of his ‘life and adventures’ and published this as a book before he died, and secondly, that his journal and book have both survived in public and private archives, leaving a detailed account of life in Dundee before and after his emigration to New South Wales, Australia.

I have been interested in the story of George Robertson Nicoll (called ‘George’ from here on) for more than twenty-five years. I first heard his name after my parents’ death. My sisters and I had cleared our family home prior to sale, and I went to visit my mother’s cousin (one of the few remaining relatives of my mother’s generation). Unexpectedly, she asked if I had come across the ‘little red book’ in our house-clearing. This question and my response to it – ‘what little red book?’ – marked the beginning of a family history quest that has captivated me, off and on, ever since. It has also given me a greater awareness of aspects of nineteenth-century Scottish history and culture, as well as a deeper appreciation of the realities and complexities of economic migration, then and now. This article focuses on George’s account of family life and work in Dundee before his emigration to New South Wales in 1848 and concludes that personal accounts such as this have much to offer our understanding of history. Before doing so, however, we must return to the question – what was (and is) the ‘little red book?’

Fifty Years’ Residence in Australia and Travels 1848 to 1898, subtitled and catalogued as *Fifty Years’ Travels in Australia, China, Japan, America Etc.*,² was written

¹ J. Pelan, ‘Archives Matter’, *Scottish Archives*, 24 (2018), 1–8, 1.

² The book is catalogued in the National Library of Scotland, British Library, National Library of Australia and state libraries in Australia as ‘Nicoll, George R. (1899) *Fifty*

by my four-times great-uncle, George Robertson Nicoll, born in Dundee in 1824. George was a blockmaker (specialist shipwright) at East Shore, who travelled as an ‘assisted migrant’³ to New South Wales, Australia, with his wife Sarah Baird and infant son George Wallace Nicoll in 1848. Over the next forty years or so, he reinvented himself a number of times over, working as a gold-digger, farmer, coastal trader and provisions’ agent and finally, as a housebuilder. He also took the opportunity to visit Scotland whenever he could (for example, to place an order at Gourlay’s yard for the building of a steamship).⁴ In retirement, George crossed the world twice over, not as a migrant, but as a tourist, sometimes with family members, but often travelling alone. Towards the end of his life, suffering from chronic bronchitis, he wrote *Fifty Years’ Travels* about his life and his travels, which he paid to be printed in London and shared with members of his family.

A number of copies of George’s book remain in libraries as well as in private family collections, although no longer, unfortunately, in my own branch of the family. The National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS) holds a negative microfilm copy, inscribed for ‘Niece Maggie with Best wishes from Uncle Geo R. Nicoll’, and there is one hard copy of the book in the British Library in London, inscribed to Mrs James Nicoll.⁵ Hard copies are catalogued in three libraries in Australia: in the Mitchell library, Sydney; in the University of Melbourne library; and in the National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA) in Canberra. The NLA catalogue also had a listing for a journal written by George, described as ‘Manuscript of “The life and adventures of George Robertson Nicoll”, which was published as “Fifty years’ travels in Australia, China, Japan, America, etc.

Years’ Travels in Australia, China, Japan, America Etc. Printed by Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd, London’.

³ Various population management schemes existed between 1832 and 1888 when they were suspended. All were designed to create a more balanced population. The colonial administration and landowners alike sought skilled and unskilled, literate and illiterate, women, men and families, principally to be farm labourers (men) and domestic servants (women) as well as tradesmen of all categories. This ‘balanced’ population was, of course, white; the devastating impact of immigration on the indigenous Aboriginal people and their way of life cannot be overstated. For more information, see B. Attwood, *The Making of Aborigines* (Sydney, 1989); E. Richards, *Destination Australia* (Sydney, 2008).

⁴ S. G. E. Lythe, *Gourlay’s: The Rise and Fall of a Scottish Shipbuilding Firm*, Abertay Historical Society, 10 (Dundee, 1964).

⁵ Further enquiries at NLS told me that the book had been copied in 1994, but no other information was available. Maggie was directly related to George’s eldest brother, James Robertson Nicoll, my four-times great-grandfather. James had married twice, first in Dundee in 1837 and then, following the death of his first wife, in Glasgow in 1862. He had eight children with his first wife and nine with his second wife. Maggie (Margaret Dalglish Nicoll), born 1864, was James’s eldest child from his Glasgow family. The British Library copy is inscribed to James’s widow, Mrs Nicoll (Alison).

1848–1898”. Also included is a forty-page journal of a cruise through the Pacific Islands in 1902 by J. B. Nicoll.⁶

There is, in truth, nothing extraordinary about either a self-published book or a journal of this nature. ‘Vanity’ projects like this were fashionable in the late nineteenth century, and, within these, the celebration of a fifty years’ time span was a common literary device.⁷ Travel writing had been popular at least since the eighteenth century and the advent of the ‘Grand Tour’ journals of James Boswell and others.⁸ By the nineteenth century, more affordable travel heralded a new cohort of travel writers, including Charles Dickens, Mary Kingsley and Robert Louis Stevenson who, on one occasion, travelled from Sydney to New Zealand on a steamship owned and built by George’s eldest son, George Wallace Nicoll.⁹ In searching the NLS catalogue for travel stories, I found 259 written between 1670 and 1870, recounting journeys to (among other places) Europe, Canada and America, Ceylon, Sudan, the West Indies and East Indies, South Africa, Egypt, southern England and the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The accounts included diaries and journals, letters, prayers and even sermons. Interestingly, George’s book did not appear in this search, suggesting that there may be many more travellers’ tales than those 259 found in my initial search. The NLA also has a number of diaries and journals written by shipboard emigrants.¹⁰ Writing was a common pastime for emigrants as they whiled away the days and weeks on a journey that took anything between four and five months.

⁶ John Baird Nicoll was George’s youngest son, born in 1862. It seems reasonable to suggest that he inherited enough money to pay for a cruise for himself and his wife after George died in 1901. The account of his trip draws heavily on the style of George’s writing but without his eye for interesting detail.

⁷ See, for example, William Walker (of Windsor), *Reminiscences (Personal, Social and Political) of a Fifty Years’ Residence at Windsor on the Hawkesbury. A lecture delivered at the Windsor School of Arts, 22nd August 1890* (Sydney, 1890). Additionally, the Rev. Dr John Dunmore Lang left one such unfinished manuscript, entitled ‘Reminiscences of my life and times, both in church and state in Australia, for upwards of fifty years past’. Both are available at the NLA.

⁸ For more information, see A. Groundwater, ‘Ben Jonson’s “foot voyage” to Scotland in 1618: Assembling the Corroborative Evidence’, *Scottish Archives*, 20 (2014), 78–89. Also C. Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (London, 1995); A. Pettinger, *Travel Writing* (Oxford, 2019); C. Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London, 2011).

⁹ Robert Louis Stevenson travelled on the *Janet Nicoll* steamship to Auckland, New Zealand, in 1889. See R. D. Campbell, ‘The Cruise of the “Janet Nicoll”: Robert Louis Stevenson visits New Zealand’, *New Zealand Marine News*, 43:2 (1994), 92–9.

¹⁰ See A. Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century British Emigrants* (Manchester, 1994). Examples include: A Lady in Australia, *Memoirs of the Past* (Melbourne, 1873); R. G. Jameson Esq., late Surgeon Superintendent of emigrants to South Australia, *A Record of Recent Travels in these Colonies, with Especial Reference to Emigration* (London, 1842); S. Mossman, *Emigrants’ Letters from Australia: Selected with Critical and Explanatory Remarks* (London, 1853).

If George's book and journal are not unusual, what makes them noteworthy is the background of their author. Travellers' tales tended to be written, unsurprisingly, by educated, middle- and upper-class men, and sometimes women. The NLS catalogue includes accounts written by lords and ladies, ship's captains and surgeons, military men (lieutenant colonels, generals and majors), bishops and ministers of religion, and merchants. George, in contrast, was a blockmaker who had left school at twelve years of age with no further formal education. Similarly, the emigration diaries held in the NLA were most frequently written by 'unassisted' settlers; not only would they have had a better education than most of the 'assisted' migrants, their living conditions would have been significantly more comfortable, making journal-writing more feasible. 'Assisted' migrants lived in the heat and dark of the bowels of the ship, with daily cooking and cleaning duties to perform. As a skilled craftsman, George was also set to work by the captain, repairing blocks during the journey to New South Wales.¹¹

George was keenly aware that he lacked formal education, as demonstrates in the introduction to his journal:

Having spent forty two years of my life, at date of writing, in New South Wales, principally in Sydney, and gained a fair amount of Colonial experience, also having seen a great many changes in the Colony and elsewhere, I think if I write a few of my adventures, during the space of sixty six years (my present age), it may be read with interest by some of my family or those who knew me personally. (Not being a scholar, I trust to be excused grammatical errors, also errors in orthography and composition.) Something may be learned from it, which may be of profit, and be the means of guarding against loss of health, of wealth, and comfort, and I may say enjoyment of life. This narrative will just be written from memory so that in all probability there will be many incidents in life that will be totally forgotten but will do my best to remember as I proceed. George R. Nicoll, October 15th, 1890.¹²

There is something apologetic about this introduction, as well as something self-important, if not downright pompous. Autobiographical writing is inevitably an exercise in self-publicity and identity formation,¹³ and the George Robertson Nicoll who presents himself here is an intelligent, experienced, man of the world, who is committed to education – he hopes that 'something may be learned' from his account – but is 'not a scholar'. He is, in many respects, illustrative of the 'lad o' pairts', and while the idea of the democratic intellect may have been a myth (very few working-class boys, and no girls, made it to university in the nineteenth century), it was nevertheless a popular one at the time.¹⁴ George was

¹¹ The journal is catalogued in the NLA as *The Life and Adventures of Mr. George Robertson Nicoll* (hereafter *The Life and Adventures*), 37.

¹² *The Life and Adventures*, 1.

¹³ See (ed.) L. Stanley, *Documents of Life Revisited: Narrative and Biographical Methodology for a 21st Century Critical Humanism* (Farnham, 2013).

¹⁴ See R. D. Anderson, *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland* (Oxford, 1983); A. Nash, 'Re-Reading the "Lad o' Pairts": The Myth of the Kailyard Myth', *Scotlands*, 3:2 (1996),

also, as the rest of his writing demonstrates, proud to be a Scottish, Presbyterian, hard-working, clean-living family man. He is the very embodiment of the ‘good emigrant’ that the new colony of New South Wales wanted, and that his hero, the Rev. Dr John Dunmore Lang wrote about.¹⁵

If it is surprising that George should have written his book and his journal, it is equally remarkable that both should be accessible today, some 130 years later. Only a small number of books were printed – they were, as stated in the preface, ‘for private circulation only’.¹⁶ It is reasonable to suggest that under normal circumstances, most would have disappeared within family collections, as was the fate of my great-grandfather’s copy. Nevertheless, the book was accepted by national libraries in the UK and Australia, as well as by the New South Wales state library and by one of the most prestigious university libraries in Australia. This says something about the quality of the writing, a point made by a NLA librarian who reviewed the book in 2003.¹⁷ That the journal survives today is even more unexpected. Curious to see what it contained, I ordered a copy of it in 2018, and when the PDF arrived I found an attached letter, dated 16 June 1938 and written by Ada Leeson, librarian at the Mitchell library, to George’s last surviving son, John Baird Nicoll. In this, she explains why she was *not* willing to buy the journal (which she judged to be largely a manuscript of the book). John died two months later, on 19 August 1938,¹⁸ and six months after this, his widow tried to sell the journal again. In what can only be described as a begging letter (dated 3 February 1939) sent to the Supreme Court in Sydney and marked ‘Private’, Gertrude Nicoll made a personal appeal to the Right Honourable Mr Justice K. A. Ferguson,¹⁹ seeking his advice about how she might ‘realise a little money

86–102; M. D. Prentis, ‘From Aberdeen to Coburg: A Lad o’ Pairts in Australia’, *Northern Scotland*, 12 (1992), 105–16.

¹⁵ John Dunmore Lang (1799–1878) was a Scottish-born Presbyterian minister, politician, activist and prolific writer, who emigrated to New South Wales in 1823 and established the Scots Church there. He wrote extensively about migration, arguing that Presbyterian Scots made better migrants than Irish Catholics because of their greater abstinence and stronger work ethic. See J. D. Lang, *An Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales, Both as a Penal Settlement and as a British Colony* (London, 1840). George admired Lang greatly; his journal states that he read an article by him before deciding to emigrate (p. 33) and he joined Lang’s church on arrival. Two of his sons were later baptised by Lang (New South Wales State Archives).

¹⁶ *Fifty Years’ Travels*, v.

¹⁷ See J. Cannon, ‘For the love of travel. China and Japan through the eyes of a nineteenth-century Scot’, *NLA News*, 3 July, 13:10 (Canberra, 2003).

¹⁸ New South Wales State Archives, online historical index. See <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/collections/state-archives-collection/>.

¹⁹ Keith Aubrey Ferguson (1895–1978), a native of Sydney, was a former judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. I have found no family connection between him and the more famous Sir John Alexander Ferguson (1881–1969), born in Invercargill, New Zealand, who moved to Sydney in 1894 and went on to become a lawyer, judge and book collector, especially focusing on Australian history. Thanks to his donations, the

on it' to pay for the medical bills that had accumulated before John had died.²⁰ We can only assume that Gertrude's plea was heard, because the manuscript made it into the NLA, and, thanks to my request for a copy, it has been digitised and is available for all to access. This branch of the Nicoll family in New South Wales had, for whatever reason, clearly fallen on hard times by the 1930s.²¹

The journal is, however, much more significant than was suggested by Ada Leeson. Although recorded as a 'manuscript' of the book, the first thirty-two pages provide detailed information about George's early life and work *before* he emigrated, contrasting with the book, which begins with the sailing of the *Royal Saxon* from London in 1848. It is this family story that becomes apparent through the writing of the journal, and it is this that provides the source material for the remainder of this article. So let us begin as George does, with his account of his birth:

On the 11th day of September 1824, I was born in Campbell's Close, High Street, Dundee, county of Forfarshire, Scotland. My Father's name was James, he was the eldest son of Thomas Nicoll, master block and pump maker, Green market, Dundee, my Mother's name was Margaret Robertson, eldest daughter of James Robertson, watch and clock maker West end High Street, Dundee [...]²²

Campbell's Close still exists and is a gated passageway that leads directly off the High Street, adjacent to one of Dundee's oldest buildings, Gardyne's Land, a late-mediaeval merchant's house.²³ While this is today a rather rundown part of city centre, in George's time the High Street (originally known as the Marketgate) was Dundee's most prestigious street, with the Townhouse and courtroom on its south side and the Trades' Hall and Union Hall at its east end.²⁴ A contemporary account describes it as follows:

When the Town House, Trades Hall and Union Hall were all in existence in the High Street of Dundee, the place presented a very picturesque appearance, recalling the market-square of some Flemish burgh rather than the thoroughfare of a Scottish Town.²⁵

Ferguson Collection in the NLA today contains 415 manuscripts or manuscript collections, including George's book and journal.

²⁰ This letter was found by a distant cousin of mine, John Macvean, a dedicated genealogist, in a library search at the Mitchell library in 2020.

²¹ John Baird and Gertrude Nicoll lie in an unmarked plot in the Field of Mars cemetery in Ryde, on the outskirts of Sydney, in stark contrast to the impressive memorial statue that marks the grave of George's wife Sarah in the Necropolis, Rookwood cemetery, Sydney's largest and most prestigious cemetery.

²² *The Life and Adventures*, 1.

²³ Gardyne's Land is the oldest domestic dwelling in Dundee. It dates from around 1560 and today is a backpackers' hostel. See C. McKean and P. Whatley, *Lost Dundee. Dundee's Lost Architectural Heritage* (Edinburgh, 2013), 31–2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53–9.

²⁵ A. C. Lamb, *Dundee. Its Quaint and Historic Buildings* (Dundee, 1895), xii.

A large number of businesses operated in the High Street in the 1820s, including drapers, hosiers, grocers, tailors, booksellers, tobacconists and three watchmakers.²⁶ As was customary in Scottish towns at the time, the ground floors were taken up with shops and businesses, while the first and second floors were residential properties, sometimes owned, but more often rented. George lived with his parents and three brothers in rooms above a draper's business; for a time, the family also had a 'nurse' (also described as a servant) living with them.²⁷ Residents in the High Street at the time of George's birth included eight writers (solicitors), two surgeons, a librarian, a teacher, a merchant and the 'town bell man' (the town crier, whose job it was to make public announcements as required). George's maternal grandfather, James Robertson, had a business and home with his second wife Isabella in the High Street. George's aunt Jean and uncle John Spink, shipmaster, also lived on the High Street, as did his aunt Margaret and her husband Dr Low, a ship's surgeon.²⁸

George's writing demonstrates great pride in his family origins. His paternal grandfather, Thomas, born in Rhynd, Perthshire, had completed an apprenticeship as a cart and wheelwright in Stanley, before coming to Dundee and retraining as a mast, pump and blockmaker.²⁹ Thomas had then set himself up in business at the Fishmarket and married Jean Chalmers in 1785; she was from Glamis, where her father had, according to George's journal, been a butler at Glamis Castle for fifty years.³⁰ George's maternal grandfather, James, was from Perth, where his father before him had also been a watch- and clockmaker, who had 'made and fitted the music bells of the town'.³¹ James was, George tells us, deacon of the Hammermen of Dundee and member of the Nine Incorporated Trades of Dundee.³² George reserves his proudest words for his

²⁶ The 1824 *Dundee Directory* provides information about all businesses that subscribed to the directory.

²⁷ *The Life and Adventures*, 7.

²⁸ Residents are also recorded in the 1824 *Dundee Directory*.

²⁹ In his journal, George tells us that his grandfather was forty years old when he came to Dundee but genealogical research suggests that this is incorrect. Thomas came earlier, marrying Jean Chalmers when he was twenty-nine years of age and already working as a blockmaker in Dundee.

³⁰ *The Life and Adventures*, 2. I have been unable to verify this information. Email correspondence with Ingrid Thomson, archivist (March 2020), stated that there are gaps in the Factors' Accounts from 1785 to 1863 and, additionally, butlers were not specifically named in the records after 1755. For more on Glamis Castle records, see I. Thomson, 'Glamis Castle Archives', *Scottish Archives*, 23 (2017), 114–23.

³¹ Again, the veracity of this cannot be proved, but a James Robertson is listed in 'Dundee Knok (Clock) Makers', extracted from J. Smith, *Old Scottish Clockmakers 1453* (1850). See <https://electriccotland.com/history/articles/clockmakers.pdf>.

³² *The Life and Adventures*, 1. The Hammermen were one of the Nine Incorporated Trades of Dundee. More than thirty crafts appear in their records including 'Clocksmith, Watchmaker and Knocksmith'; see <https://www.ninetradesofdundee.co.uk/the-nine>

mother, Margaret Ogilvie (also spelt Ogilvy) Robertson, whom he describes as ‘a noble woman, highly educated and who kept the acquaintance of the best society in town’.³³ Margaret was named after her mother, Margaret Ogilvie. Her father had been George Ogilvie, a sadler, originally from Glamis; her brother was George Ogilvie, described in the journal as a ‘planter in the West Indies’.³⁴ Margaret Ogilvie died aged forty-two years in 1807, and two months later grandfather James married again. His new wife was Isabella Simpson, a trained midwife who continued to work throughout her marriage, delivering babies for ‘most of the nobility throughout the neighbourhood and country’.³⁵ George sums up his forebears as follows:

[...] so that my foreFathers are all country Scotch people of strong constitutions, healthy and rather good looking, and of a good race, industrious, and pushing, not indolent or slothful, and for the most part self reliant, all having to work for their own living, being naturally industrious.³⁶

George describes a happy early childhood in the company of his beloved mother, who taught him to read and write. As the youngest of four sons, he spent most of his days with her. As he writes:

We used to kneel together every day at prayer in the forenoon, when she would pray for all our friends and family, the church and the world, then if it was fine weather, we went for a walk, very often up to the soldiers’ barracks and home again, whereby we got the fresh air, in the afternoon we would go to some of her acquaintances, and have tea.³⁷

-incorporated-trades/history/. Also A. M. Smith, *The Nine Trades of Dundee*, Abertay Historical Society, 35 (Dundee, 1995).

³³ *The Life and Adventures*, 2. The chiefs of the Ogilvy/Ogilvie clan were (and still are) the earls of Airlie and, while I have been unable to substantiate any actual family connection, it is likely that this is the ‘noble blood’ to which George referred. It was common practice to name children born on a landed estate after the local laird. In consequence, there are many people who are not blood relatives, but sound as if they might be. For more information, see J. L. Roberts, *Clan, King, and Covenant: History of the Highland Clans from the Civil War to the Glencoe Massacre* (Edinburgh, 2000).

³⁴ *The Life and Adventures*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15. The 1851 census records Isabella as a midwife and head of the household aged seventy-nine years (her husband James had died in 1845; had he been alive, she would likely have been recorded only as ‘wife’, as was the custom). Midwifery in Scotland was not regulated until 1915; as someone who had undergone years of training, Isabella’s skills would have been much in demand. For more information, see <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/features/safe-delivery-a-history-of-scottish-midwives>; L. Reid, *Midwifery in Scotland. A History* (Erskine, 2011) and ‘Midwifery Matters: Finding Sources to Shed Light Upon the 1915 Midwives (Scotland) Act’, *Scottish Archives*, 23 (2017), 66–79.

³⁶ *The Life and Adventures*, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

But George's childhood was not always so idyllic. In 1830, George's father's business failed.³⁸ He found work in Arbroath and sent home parcels of smoked fish for the family table at weekends, only visiting occasionally. Although just seventeen miles distant, travel on the back of a cart was time-consuming and there was no rail connection at this point.³⁹ George's eldest brother, James Robertson, was forced to leave home and school, taking a live-in 'situation' as a clerk working without pay for a linen manufacturer. This in spite of the fact that he was 'a very good scholar [...] so much so, that the teachers could not teach him any more, and [he] was ready for the university – but Father was not in a position to keep him at it'.⁴⁰ Soon after, George's brother, Thomas, also left school, securing a position as a clerk for a writer (solicitor) while moving in with his aunt (his mother's sister). George was, by now, attending Meadowside Academy, under the leadership of Mr Mackintosh, a strict disciplinarian, whom he feared greatly and described as 'a Highland monster'.⁴¹ His mother, meanwhile, was terminally ill, and yet the family could not afford to keep the nurse who was sent home to Lochee. Margaret died of 'consumption' (pulmonary tuberculosis) in August 1832,⁴² and James returned home to look after the two younger sons who were still living at home. Two years later, he married again, this time to Helen Scott. At twenty-two years of age, she was more than twenty years his junior and the daughter of a linen manufacturer and spirit merchant in Cupar, Fife.⁴³ It seems likely that the marriage brought James a dowry; the move of family residence to Meadow Place suggests that

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ The railway between Dundee and Arbroath did not open until 1838. More information from E. F. Carter, *An Historical Geography of the Railways of the British Isles* (London, 1959); P. Marshall, *The Railways of Dundee* (Headington, 1996).

⁴⁰ *The Life and Adventures*, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., 5. Meadowside Academy was a small privately run school in Dundee. It is noteworthy that George's brothers had attended the more prestigious Dundee Academy and Grammar School, indicating a squeeze on family resources at this time. The schools came together to form the Public Seminaries in 1829, and later became Dundee High School. See *One Hundred and Fifty Proud Years* (1984), produced by the High School of Dundee (Dundee City Archives: GD/DHS/7/4/1/4).

⁴² Although tuberculosis was a major cause of death in Scotland in the packed tenements of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, it was not a condition that affected only the poor. On the contrary, the 'great white plague' was epidemic in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, causing millions of deaths. Margaret may have been exposed to infection in a number of places, including the many churches she visited. See J. Frith, 'History of Tuberculosis. Part 1 – Phthisis, Consumption and the White Plague', *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, 22:2 (2014), 29–35, <https://jmvh.org/article/history-of-tuberculosis-part-1-phthisis-consumption-and-the-white-plague/>.

⁴³ This information is from *Scotland's People* online records; George's own account of his stepmother is not accurate; he imagines her as much older ('about 30 years of age'). See *The Life and Adventures*, 14.

this might be so.⁴⁴ But George experienced Helen as a harsh and demanding stepmother, and when she and James had their own baby son in 1840, he felt there was nothing left for him and his brother John.⁴⁵ George was also (from ten years of age) expected to go to the docks after school to help his father. As he writes:

[...] I had to turn the grindstone, tread the turning lathe, help cut timber with the crosscut often until 9 and even 10 at night, until I was that tired I was unable to walk home.⁴⁶

For a period in the late 1830s and early 1840s, the Nicoll family blockmaking business did well. James opened a ‘branch shop’ in Perth, run first by the eldest son, James Robertson, and later by George himself, after he had finished his apprenticeship at Thomas Adamson, shipbuilder in Dundee. James Robertson and Thomas subsequently started a new venture, the Dundee Iron Company, with financial and practical help from their uncle and cousin, James and John Robertson from Glasgow, as well as from their grandfather Robertson. When trade across the UK fell, five of the seven shipyards in Perth closed and the branch shop was no longer needed.⁴⁷ George returned reluctantly to ‘smoky Dundee’, where he moved into lodgings and worked for his father for a small salary.⁴⁸ He then secured a job as a traveller and warehouseman working for his brothers. This did not last, however. In 1846, the Dundee Iron Company was dissolved, and George (still only twenty-two years of age and now married to Sarah Baird) was out of work again. His only recourse was to travel to the country home of his uncle, James Robertson, at Glenloin,⁴⁹ to borrow £20 so that he might set up his own business.⁵⁰ Soon after, he set up a blockmaking

⁴⁴ Both men and women in Scotland were expected to bring economic resources to their marriage, although husbands could do as they wished after a dowry was handed over. Property often reverted to women following the deaths of their husbands. See K. Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power. Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650–1850* (Manchester, 2011). The Nicoll family is recorded as living in Meadow Place in the 1841 census (see *Scotland’s People*).

⁴⁵ *The Life and Adventures*, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. More information from S. G. E. Lythe, ‘Shipbuilding at Dundee Down to 1914’, *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, 11:3 (1964), 219–32; G. J. Bruce with contributor I. Garrard, *The Business of Shipbuilding* (London, 2013).

⁴⁷ See G. Hutton, *Old Perth* (Ochiltree, n.d.).

⁴⁸ *The Life and Adventures*, 23.

⁴⁹ Successful businessmen in Glasgow and Edinburgh were much more likely at this time to buy country houses than their counterparts in Dundee. See C. A. Whatley, ‘Altering Images of the Industrial City: The Case of James Myles, the “Factory Boy” and Mid-Victorian Dundee’, in (ed.) L. Miskell, C. A. Whatley and B. Harris, *Victorian Dundee: Image and Realities* (East Linton, 2000), 70–96.

⁵⁰ George expresses considerable resentment towards his uncle, who contested his grandfather’s will and lost his mother’s share in the process. As a consequence, although

shop at the Shore next to his father, but he was effectively in competition with him and there was not enough work for the two businesses. The last recorded mention of James working as a blockmaker was in 1846;⁵¹ by the time of the 1851 census, his occupation was said to be ‘warehouseman’, presumably working for his son Thomas, who had taken over the iron business after the brothers’ joint venture had collapsed.

This whistle-stop tour of the ups and downs of family life and work illustrates well the impact that the wider economy was having on the lives of the Nicoll family members; what the sociologist C. Wright Mills has described as the connection between ‘the personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure’.⁵² We find that by looking *beyond* the family story, we can begin to understand the full meaning of the economic, social and political context in which they were living. George’s story throws into sharp relief the changes that were taking place in the shipbuilding industry throughout the nineteenth century, as iron replaced wood, and steam replaced sail. The craft of blockmaking *by hand*, as we have seen, was relatively short-lived, and George opted to travel halfway around the world in 1848 in large part because of the pressure that this placed on him and his family. This is also a story, however, about the importance of family connections. It was extended family members who helped the Nicoll brothers to get started in business, and it was those brothers who then gave employment to George and later to their father, James, when blockmaking was no longer a viable craft. It was also, critically, family money that gave the Nicolls the financial injections they needed from time to time, through dowries, inheritances and, as we have seen, a loan. Miskell goes so far as to argue that links of kinship, marriage and business ‘shaped urban life in Dundee’.⁵³

There is another aspect to the Nicoll family story that cannot be ignored. It was inherited wealth from profits from plantations in the West Indies that first helped the Robertsons and then the Nicolls in their various business ventures. In the subsequent generation, one nephew found work as an agent of a sugar company while another became an importer of wine from the West Indies. Members of the extended family also travelled to Calcutta and to what is now Bangladesh, working as overseers and accountants in the jute industry. Although George was as proud of the British Empire as he was of ‘bonnie Scotland’⁵⁴ (as his accounts of later visits to empire festivals demonstrate), he offers no comment whatsoever on empire and slavery. He is, of course, not alone in this regard. On

George describes this as a ‘loan’, he believed the money was owed to him. See *The Life and Adventures*, 50.

⁵¹ 1846–47 *Post Office and Dundee Directory*.

⁵² C. W. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford, 1959), 8.

⁵³ L. Miskell, ‘Civic Leadership and the Manufacturing Elite: Dundee, 1829–1870’, in (ed.) Miskell, Whatley and Harris, *Victorian Dundee*, 51–69, 63.

⁵⁴ *Fifty Years’ Travels*, 64.

the contrary, this absence was commonplace with most of his contemporaries, and is only being redressed in very recent years.⁵⁵

Finally, it is important to reflect on what George's background has to tell us about social class in nineteenth-century lowland Scotland. Although the Nicoll family was neither poor nor working-class, nor was it what might be considered middle-class, because it was not the family of a merchant or shipbuilder, or the family of a professional person (doctor, lawyer or minister of religion). On the contrary, the Nicolls seemed to have had a foot in both camps: they could, at any point, have slipped into poverty or alternatively, 'made it' into a more affluent lifestyle. Harris provides helpful insight here, suggesting that there was only a small group of between thirty and sixty people that led Dundee society and business in the first half of the nineteenth century. This group 'included individuals who were involved in manufacturing as well as trading linen [...] the most successful also diversified into other activities, including banking, whaling, sugar refining, brewing, cotton and woollen manufacturing, and in one case, oil production'.⁵⁶ The 'merchant elite', he continues, 'formed the apex of a much broader, diverse local middling class, which encompassed lesser merchants, shipmasters, numerous tradesmen and shopkeepers, as well as professionals of various kinds'.⁵⁷ The Nicoll family, in common with others in the 'local middling class', never did reach the higher echelons of Dundee society, although George's brother Thomas was elected to the Town Council later in life, before dying a bankrupt.⁵⁸ George, and others like him, chose to emigrate to a social, economic and cultural context which (at least for the new white settlers) was more open than the one they had left behind, offering more scope for social class mobility and self-improvement. As he writes in his journal, he was travelling 'to a land fairer than this'.⁵⁹ George was ultimately, in common with so many people on the move today, an economic migrant, but he was also one of the lucky ones. Not only did he have the backing and support of his family in Dundee, he was

⁵⁵ Recent commentators including Michael Morris have asserted that Britain's reliance on slavery has been 'minimised and marginalised at every turn': M. Morris, 'Confronting the legacy of slavery in Scotland', Centre for Scottish Culture blog, 11 June 2020, <https://dundeescottishculture.org/history/confronting-the-legacy-of-slavery-in-scotland>. See also (ed.) T. M. Devine, *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection* (Edinburgh, 2015).

⁵⁶ B. Harris, 'Merchants, the Middling Sort, and Cultural Life in Georgian Dundee', in (ed.) C. McKean, B. Harris and C.A. Whatley, *Dundee: Renaissance to Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 2009), 245.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁵⁸ Thomas Nicoll was on the Town Council for a number of years, a director of the Dundee Property and Investment Company, and a director of the High School, in his role as representative of the Dundee Town Council (see *Post Office Directory*, 1861–62). He was also on the board of the Lunatic Asylum and on the Police Commission in the early 1860s, as well as being on the committee for the new burying-ground and on the committee of the Nine Incorporated Trades, acting as Dean of Guild from 1865 to 1868. His business crashed in 1882, owing substantial sums of money.

⁵⁹ *The Life and Adventures*, 33.

also sponsored by the colonial administration of the day, so that the voyage cost only £1 each for himself and his wife, and his son travelled for free.⁶⁰ This is a very different scenario from that facing migrant workers today, as they attempt to make a better future for themselves and their families.

To return, then, to the Nicoll family story and its relevance for historians and archivists alike. I hope that this has demonstrated the usefulness of family stories as *history*; such accounts have the potential to give us insight into aspects of social and economic history to which we might not otherwise have had access, allowing us to make connections between the personal, social and economic factors that impinge on the lives of both an individual and family members. The story has, additionally, demonstrated the fragility of family history sources; that George's journal exists today is as much due to happenchance as it is by design. It might well have disappeared, or just as likely, sat unread, given that it was wrongly recorded in the library catalogue. Finally, the story should encourage all those interested in social history to think again about archives in their widest sense. George Robertson Nicoll's story offers an example of what might be discovered in the most unlikely of places. Looking to the future, it might be argued that it is the online genealogical platforms such as Ancestry.com and FindMyPast that hold the keys to unlocking our shared past, through their accounts of narratives, memories and identities. Moreover, it seems likely that, had George had been emigrating in 2022 instead of 1848, he would have written a blog or podcast rather than a journal. But that, as they say, is another story.

⁶⁰ Ibid.