

The Outdoor Blind People of Perth and Perthshire, 1886–1908

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This article follows an earlier contribution to *Scottish Archives* that investigated the strengths and weaknesses of a Register of Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders focusing on the first decade of the twentieth century. It is prompted by the ‘discovery’ of another Register that was compiled and maintained by the Society for Teaching the Blind to Read on Moon’s System for the City and County of Perth (hereafter the Perth Society), compiled between 1886 and 1908. This second Register enables the investigation of outdoor blind experience in Perth and Perthshire and opens a window on blind lives in urban and rural environments in the southern Highlands during the late Victorian period as well as the Edwardian era.

In *Scottish Archives*, 22 (2016), I described ‘The Value of a Flawed Source: The Register of the Missions to Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh, the Borders and the Lothians, c.1903–10’. When the Register of Outdoor Blind for Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders (hereafter the Edinburgh Register), listing blind people living in their own homes, or in lodging houses, or poorhouses, during the period c.1903 to c.1910, was found among historical documents in the offices of RNIB Scotland, it was seen as a unique gateway to discovering individual life experiences of people with sight loss. The examples of life journeys that were subsequently traced were quite different from each other. Life experiences of outdoor blind people in south-east Scotland in the Edwardian period were noted for their individuality and their refuting of blind stereotypes.

The Edinburgh mission was founded in 1857 and, over the following three decades, societies under a variety of names, but with the widely shared aim of teaching blind people to read raised type so that they might access the Bible, were established in every region of Scotland. The Scottish Outdoor Teachers Union decided, in 1906, that each outdoor society should keep ‘A Common Register Or Roll Book’ in an effort to properly quantify blind people, their circumstances of sight loss, their tactile print reading ability, their domestic situations and other data surrounding their lives as blind people ‘in the community’.¹ The Edinburgh Register begins c.1903 and it was speculated that the Edinburgh Society, when first using its register, had backdated its initial entries three years before the intended starting year. However, the Perth Register of Outdoor Blind (hereafter

¹ I. Hutchison, *Feeling Our History: The Experience of Blindness and Sight Loss in Edwardian Edinburgh, the Lothians and the Scottish Borders* (Edinburgh, 2015), 16.

the Perth Register) begins in 1886.² That year, William Auchincloss Arrol, a member of the Royal Commission on the Blind, challenged decennial census statistics on the number of blind people in Scotland, believing that they understated the true figure.³ To support his argument, he made reference to existing registers operated by the outdoor societies, but his concerns may also have resulted in the societies tightening their administration and having had a role in the starting of a new register by the Perth Society that same year.⁴

The Edinburgh Register had been haphazardly maintained, yet its ‘discovery’ in 2013 seemed to mark it out as a unique document that offered insight to blind experience absent from philanthropic annual reports and minute books of organisations focusing on blind people. However, its unique nature took a knock in 2021, when I was invited by the Scottish Council on Visual Impairment (SCOVl) to review minute books created by a predecessor blind society umbrella organisation, the Scottish National Federation of Institutions and Societies for the Blind (SNFISB), founded in 1917.⁵ The SNFISB was renamed as the Scottish National Federation for the Welfare of the Blind (SNFWB) on 13 June 1930.⁶ Among the minute books within the SCOVl collection was the Perth Register of outdoor blind, formerly used by the Perth Society, which was founded in 1866.⁷ The Perth Society continues to serve people with sight loss in Perth and Kinross through the ultimate successor organisation, VisionPK.⁸ The circumstances of this Perth Register passing into the hands of SCOVl are unclear. While its discovery was exciting, this register’s surfacing initially seemed to undermine the unique status we had accorded the Edinburgh Register. This article argues, however, that this is not so, because the Perth Register covers an earlier and longer time period, and was compiled using a methodology different from that employed in the Edinburgh Register, both societies paying scant attention to the very precise guidance given within the front cover of these formal ledgers.

Like the Edinburgh Register, the page format of the Perth Register was designed to record a range of data about blind people living in a specified area. Left-hand pages recorded males and right-hand pages females. In addition to details beside each name which included address, place of birth and conjugal

² Access to the Perth Register and the ‘index of Perth Blind’ (IPB) introduced on p. 57, which provide much of the research data for this article, has been made available by kind permission of Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland.

³ For a comprehensive overview of the history of blindness, see G. Phillips, *The Blind in British Society: Charity, State and Community, 1780–1930* (Aldershot, 2004). Helen Dunbar has written about outdoor blind people in *History of the Society for the Blind in Glasgow and the West of Scotland, 1859–1989* (Glasgow, 1989).

⁴ Lothian Health Services Archive, William Auchincloss Arrol, ‘A Few Statistics in Connection with the Blind in Scotland’ (1886).

⁵ SNFISB Minute Book 1, 1917–1928, 30 July 1917.

⁶ SNFWB Minute Book 2, 1928–1937, p. 63.

⁷ <https://visionpk.org.uk/about-us/our-history/>.

⁸ Ibid.

status, a double column recorded age ‘when sight was lost’ and ‘cause of blindness’. As might be expected, the society wished to know if the people whom it recorded could read normal print before the loss of their sight, and whether, in due course as blind people, they could read raised type, which in late Victorian Scotland might be Braille, Alston or Moon. Occupation before sight loss was recorded, while in their circumstances of blindness, missionaries were instructed to be clear in differentiating between those who were able-bodied and those who were infirm and, therefore, ‘necessarily’ disabled and unemployed. The Register also demanded to know each person’s religious denomination: of those in the Perth Register, 99 per cent are indicated as being ‘Protestant’.

The Perth Register was in use from 1886 to 1908. As recommended in the guidance for completing the Register, from 1889 the missionaries fell into a pattern of making annual entries for each person, but they did this by rewriting the people on the roll onto fresh pages every two years. So, for example, David Ferguson, the first male entry for 1891, is shown as a 63-year-old who was granted three shillings and sixpence weekly by way of poor relief, but which he was supplementing by selling tea (one of several ‘typical’ blind occupations). On the following line, his age was updated to sixty-four for the year 1892, but no other entries were made, suggesting no additional adjustment to his circumstances.⁹ The process was then repeated on new pages for 1893 and 1894. By 1908, register entries for Perth and Perthshire’s blind had run to 139 pages. The missionaries’ completion of individual entries in the Perth Register is fairly comprehensive except for the columns on employment and income. This might be indicative of a dearth of income for many blind people than of laxity on the part of the compiler for these columns of the Register. While the Perth Register was not maintained after 1908, an informal register exists for the 1930s, beginning in September 1931. For this period, a general stationery index book was employed, but while its primary function appears to have been simply to list the names and addresses of blind people, it was often annotated with other miscellaneous details. An example is Lucy Fletcher, discussed below, who appears throughout the 1886 Perth Register and found a place in the 1931 ‘Register of Blind People in the City of Perth’, which I refer to in this article as the Index of Perth Blind (IPB), where her death the following year was also recorded.¹⁰

The initial pages of the 1886 Perth Register were used from that year until 1889. During that three-year period, forty-seven males were listed, but for a ‘final’ figure this has to be reduced to thirty-four because of thirteen removals including five deaths and one young man, James Stewart, a farm servant from the village of Meigle, entering the Dundee Blind Asylum. There were fifty-two females, but their number was reduced by six including two deaths, Jeanie Martin’s transfer to the Edinburgh Blind Asylum, and a thirteen-year-old girl’s dispatch to the Scottish National Institution (SNI) at Larbert, a residential

⁹ Perth Register of Outdoor Blind, 1886–1908 (Perth Register), p. 22.

¹⁰ ‘Register of Blind Persons in the City of Perth, Sept 1931’ – Index of Perth Blind (IPB).

training establishment for ‘imbecile’ children.¹¹ In 1908, the last year of the Perth Register, there were fifty-four males listed, but adjusted down to thirty-nine due to deaths and departures, while there were seventy-eight females which was reduced to sixty-four, again as a consequence of deaths and departures.

Causes of sight loss, and annotations of occupations, are two areas where the Perth Register has been completed irregularly or inconsistently. However, there are enough entries under these categories to provide overviews and 1897/8, being at the middle of the period covered by the Register, gives sufficient data to identify common causes for the onset of blindness.¹² Cataract regularly intervened irrespective of age, but other instigators included inflammation, strain, amaurosis, measles, scarlet fever, and of course accidents. The most dramatic change in circumstances was probably that experienced by Matthew Mason of Perth, a sailor who lost his sight at the age of forty-three as the consequence of a lightning strike after which he was reduced to ‘keeping house’ and being the recipient of parochial support at half a crown weekly.¹³ Before their loss of sight, male occupations as diverse as student, minister, butler, postman and quarryman were recorded, this last occupation being one that was a common cause of blindness when accidents occurred during the likes of rock blasting for railway construction.¹⁴ Rural male occupations before loss of sight included farmer, agricultural labourer, drover and crofter. Women also worked in such roles as farm servant, agricultural outworker, dairy keeper, fishwife, millworker, factory worker and in domestic service, therefore having occupations covering agricultural, industrial and home work.¹⁵ Following onset of blindness, males engaging in occupations that might make them able-bodied rather than disabled in the eyes of the Poor Law included roadman, millworker and newsagent, but also occupations promoted by the blind societies such as carrier, tea dealer and firewood merchant. Additionally, blind people engaged

¹¹ Perth Register, pp. 3, 5. The thirteen-year-old girl was Christina Robertson of Kinfauns. She was admitted to the SNI as an ‘elected’ case, her father contributing £5 annually (Archives and Special Collections, University of Stirling, SNI, RS/1/3/565). This was despite the SNI’s policy of excluding ‘cases of insanity, of confirmed epilepsy, of the deaf and dumb, and of the blind’ (SNI, RS/1/3). The 1881 census for Errol, the parish where Christina was living with her family when seven years old, clearly states that she had been ‘blind from birth’. Christina died in the SNI, of tuberculosis, on 27 March 1888 (SNI, Register of Deaths 1879–1909, RS/1/5/1). See I. Hutchison, ‘Accepted and Rejected: Late Nineteenth-Century Application for Admission to the Scottish National Institution for the Education of Imbecile Children’, in (ed.) R. Ellis, S. Kendal and S. J. Taylor, *Voices in the History of Madness: Personal and Professional Perspectives on Mental Health and Illness* (London, 2021), 25–48.

¹² Perth Register, 1897/98, pp. 66–75.

¹³ Ibid., p. 66, no. 3.

¹⁴ G. A. Johnston Ross, *The Story of a Working Man’s Blindness* (Inverness, 1883) paraphrases the experience of one man’s sight loss, brought about when dynamite misfired during the construction of the West Highland railway line.

¹⁵ Perth Register, 1897/98, pp. 66–75.

in occupations that the missionaries frowned upon such as street musicians and beggars. Blind women typically performed the conventional roles of knitters and housekeepers.¹⁶

In the course of the earlier exploration of outdoor blind people listed in the Edinburgh Register, it was found that Robert Ponton, a man who experienced sight loss in midlife, moved from Haddingtonshire (now East Lothian) to Perthshire with other family members. This relocation appears to have taken place around 1909 or 1910 and, while he was recorded in the 1901 census as 'blind', this was not shown to be the case in 1911.¹⁷ But in the 1921 census, which did not pose the question of previous censuses about the presence of sensory or mental infirmity, he was living on Bellour Farm with a nephew and his family, under 'occupation' the entry is 'none (blind)'.¹⁸ Robert, a former shepherd, lived in agricultural settings with his brothers, but in later life, for a time, he lived alone in Perth. It seems that Robert was an independent man and while it is probable that he was vision impaired, he had some residual sight.¹⁹ He appears in the 1931 IPB, but with a modest entry that suggests the earlier Edinburgh findings were correct in that he did not let blindness prevent him from ploughing his own furrow in life.²⁰ Nonetheless, his presence in the IPB provides a useful link between blind missionary outreach in both Perthshire and East Lothian.

The Edinburgh study produced a diverse set of blind experience that was ultimately featured in the book *Feeling Our History*. That project did not set out to assemble blind people who were noticeably varied; research volunteers merely sought a good selection of census and other records from which case studies could be developed. By contrast, in selecting the four Perthshire cases presented below, some targeting has taken place. Consequently, this article showcases two male and two female cases which are also two urban cases from the city of Perth and two rural cases from Perthshire's varied hinterland. While people were entered in, and removed from, the Perth Register as an ongoing process, the cases selected remained in the Register for two decades from the late Victorian to the early Edwardian period, and therefore can be explored with some continuity. A more detailed study of a larger cohort remains for a later time. The four individuals featured in this article are Lucy Fletcher (1852–1932), Annie Jamieson, née McRobbie or Campbell (c.1847–1929), Thomas McGlashan (1840–1910) and the previously mentioned David Ferguson (c.1831–1905).

Lucy Fletcher

Lucy Fletcher lost her sight as the result of an unspecified accident and she was placed in the Perth Register in 1890. While her age at the time of her accident was recorded as twenty-five years and the accident itself was claimed

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Decennial census, 1901, Gladsmuir; 1911, Wester Fowlis.

¹⁸ Decennial census, 1921, Wester Fowlis.

¹⁹ Hutchison, *Feeling Our History*, 88–92.

²⁰ IPB, Robert Ponton.

as occurring in 1886, the details are open to challenge. She was also annotated as being born in Perth, a claim that was continued over the following years, but which is erroneous.²¹

Lucy was born in Milton of Campsie, Stirlingshire, on 8 August 1852.²² Lucy's father, Oswald Fletcher, who worked as an engraver, died from phthisis in 1855 and within his death registration details his family are listed in full. He had four daughters – Ann, Jane, Harriet and Louisa (Lucy) – and one son, Thomas, living, but there had been an earlier Lucy, born on 18 August 1851, who died, aged one, in 1852.²³ The second Lucy, discussed here, lost her father in her infancy, and his death at the age of forty-three undoubtedly resulted in a downturn in the family's circumstances. Six years later, Oswald's wife, Jane Fletcher, working as a seamstress, was struggling to care for five children, three still at school, in a one-room dwelling in Perth.²⁴ Life did not become easier for Jane through the next decade during which she gave birth to an illegitimate son, James. In 1871 she was working as a dressmaker, her daughter Harriet was employed in a factory and the unplanned arrival, James, whose birth registration she had delayed for seven months and was recorded under her maiden name of Chalmers, was attending school.²⁵ Lucy, at this time, was a domestic servant to a family household occupying a more salubrious tenement dwelling nearby.²⁶

Some form of upturn in fortune appears to have taken place by the 1880s, by which time Lucy was residing with her mother once more, along with James who, aged eighteen, had become a wage earner as a printer-compositor, although later he had a career change and became a butcher. Now flitting between tenement houses of five or six rooms, this might be explained by their decision to take in boarders, a not uncommon practice.²⁷ It was during this period, in 1886, that Lucy lost her sight in an accident, and her most recent occupation of mantle-maker was no longer viable.²⁸ Living with her mother and younger brother, she was described as 'in house' or 'housekeeper', often a domestic role, but one that may have assumed responsibility for lodgers. Yet, lodgers had but a fleeting presence in census returns, and from 1897 the Perth missionary described Lucy as living on 'independent means', a term often used for the likes of annuitants enjoying some degree of comfort from investment income.²⁹ While census returns for this period described her as a retired mantle-maker, by 1911 enumerators were noting both Lucy and Jane, her elder spinster sister, as

²¹ Perth Register, p. 25.

²² Old Parish Records (hereafter OPR), Milton of Campsie, baptismal record, 3 October 1853.

²³ OPR, Milton of Campsie, baptismal record, 15 September 1851; death registration of Oswald Fletcher, 22 February 1855, Milton of Campsie.

²⁴ Decennial census, 1861, Perth.

²⁵ Registration of Births, 1863, Perth; Decennial census, 1871, Perth.

²⁶ Decennial census, 1871, Perth.

²⁷ Decennial census, 1881 and 1891, Perth.

²⁸ Perth Register, p. 25.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 69.

having ‘private means’, their mother having died in 1902.³⁰ Where the ‘means’ that enabled this independence came from is not apparent, although one of their siblings may have done sufficiently well in life to provide for their support.

Although Lucy was accepted by census enumerators as being born c.1854, the OPR entry is quite specific that she was born in 1852, meaning that she was two years older than assumed. By contrast, the Perth Society enquiries concluded that Lucy was born c.1863 and continued in this belief for two decades. While they noted that she became blind in 1886, their assertion that this occurred when she was twenty-five is clearly incorrect.³¹ Irrespective of the doubt that people often had about their date of birth before civil registrations were introduced in 1855, the repeated recording of Lucy as being a decade younger than she was in reality casts doubts on the Perth Society’s level of engagement with her as one of their ‘outdoor blind’. The primary role of the Perth Society was to teach blind people to read raised type. How receptive blind people were to this intervention was variable. The Perth Register consistently records Lucy as being unable to read tactile print, a situation that prevailed for an apparent seventeen years from the time of her sight loss until 1903 when she was first credited with this skill.³² While Lucy’s level of enthusiasm and perseverance in mastering reading by touch can only be speculated, perhaps her starting point at age thirty-eight under the Perth Society’s tutelage, rather than age twenty-nine as the missionary assumed, gives some explanation for her apparent slow uptake. Nonetheless, her eventual achievement must have brought pleasure to the Society’s itinerant teacher, William Thomson, who completed fifty years of service in 1929.³³

The Perth Register fell out of use after 1908, but Lucy briefly reappeared in the Perth Society’s records when its new, informal register was set up in 1931, and in which it recorded Lucy’s continued presence in Perth until her death in 1932 at the age of eighty.³⁴ The life of the former mantle-maker following her sight loss is largely unknown except that, after a rather impoverished upbringing because of the death of her father, most of her life as a blind person enjoyed a certain level of prosperity. Like her elder sister, Jane, who died in 1934, Lucy passed away at Tofthill in the rural Perthshire parish of Kinfauns.³⁵ Tofthill had become the home of their sister, Harriet, upon her marriage to John Moncrieff

³⁰ Decennial census, 1891, 1901, 1911, Perth; Registration of Death, Perth, 11 April 1902, Jane Fletcher née Chalmers.

³¹ Perth Register, p. 41.

³² Ibid., p. 103.

³³ Perth Society, 63rd Report, 31 March 1929, p. 3. Grateful thanks are due to VisionPK, Perth, for access to annual reports in its care.

³⁴ IPB, Lucy Fletcher.

³⁵ Registration of Death, Kinfauns, 20 November 1932, Lucy Fletcher; Registration of Death, Kinfauns, Jane Fletcher, 28 April 1934 with Register of Corrected Entries, 11 May 1934. As with their mother, Jane Fletcher (d.1902), their cause of death was recorded as senile decay. In 1932, the Perth Society reported 171 people on its roll: 101 females and 70 males. See Perth Society, 67th Report, 31 March 1933, p. 3; Perth Register, p. 41.

in 1876 and may have been the source of their support.³⁶ Although Lucy and Jane died at Kinfauns, their death registrations record that their residence was still 3 Paradise Place, Perth, the six-room dwelling that had been their home for over four decades. Indeed, when the 1921 census was taken, Lucy was the sole occupant of this large dwelling at 3 Paradise Street [*sic*]; Jane was already residing at Toftmill.³⁷ Whatever the origin of their later material comfort, it must have been significant because Lucy and Jane were not only the owners of their own home, but also of two further houses at the same address, one rented to a commercial traveller and the other to a teacher of music, providing rental income that would have supported their financial independence.³⁸

The detail of Lucy's day-to-day life after her sight loss is largely speculative but, in addition to achieving financial security absent from her earlier years, she eventually learned to read raised type which may have provided her with some solace by opening a door to a range of embossed-type literature. Her level of support from the Perth Society during midlife is unclear, but she had the enduring companionship of her mother, her elder sister Jane, and the family of her married sister, Harriet. But as joint proprietor of the Paradise Place property she was on a par with her sighted sister, Jane, and not her dependant.

Annie Jamieson or McRobbie or Campbell

The Perth Register has an entry for 'Mrs Jamieson' that first occurs in 1890, but it notes that she was known to the Perth Society since 1866, the year of its founding. No forename was indicated in 1890, but the Register stated that she was blind from birth, married and in middle age. Researching Annie required patience and tracing her marriage provided the necessary starting point.³⁹ Annie McRobbie, age forty-two and the illegitimate daughter of Ann McRobbie, married James Jamieson, forty-eight, widower, on 7 December 1888 in Logiealmond, Perthshire. The marriage took place at Sandyknowe, the farm where Annie was an outdoor worker; James was a farm servant at nearby Wester Groan.⁴⁰ It was the discovery of this marriage that enabled Annie to be tracked to the beginning of the Register where she appeared under her maiden name of McRobbie.⁴¹

Annie McRobbie was born c 1847 in Monzie parish. She does not appear in the Old Parish Register for Monzie, her illegitimacy possibly meaning that she was not baptised because of stigma or ostracism. The first reference to her is in the 1851 census, age four, living with her mother, aunt, uncle and grandmother, but under the name of Annie Campbell, perhaps suggesting Ann's hope that

³⁶ Registration of Marriage, Perth, 1876, Harriet Fletcher and John Moncrieff.

³⁷ Decennial census, 1921, Perth; 1921, Kinfauns.

³⁸ Valuation Roll, Perth Burgh, 1920/21, Jane and Lucy Fletcher.

³⁹ Perth Register, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Registration of Marriage, District of Logiealmond, 7 December 1888, James Jamieson and Annie McRobbie.

⁴¹ Perth Register, p. 7.

Annie's unidentified father might yet enter into wedlock.⁴² Thereafter, for the next three decades, she was recorded as Annie McRobbie (with slight spelling variations), her mother and Aunt Janet variously described as workers in a flax mill and as agricultural labourers, while Annie herself, after finishing her schooling, was initially engaged in 'outdoor work'.⁴³ Throughout this period they lived in Monzie, but were continually on the move from one cottage or farm to another, a feature of the practice of annual feeing of farm labour.⁴⁴

In 1888, at the age of forty-two, Annie married James Jamieson, a widower six years her senior. Her husband was another son of the land, variously employed as a farm servant, agricultural labourer, cattleman and ploughman. As is seen in numerous address changes against her name in the Perth Register, in married life Annie was still constantly on the move from one dwelling to another, but all within a compact area of south Perthshire between Dunblane and Muthill, such as Greenloaning, Braco, Tullibardine and Blackford.⁴⁵ James Jamieson died suddenly in 1913 at the age of seventy-five as the result of a brain injury (hemiplegia).⁴⁶ Annie's own demise came at the age of eighty-two, at which time she seems to no longer have had any family to provide her with support. It was at this point that Annie's link with the Perth Society was truly affirmed as her death was registered by William Thomson, the Society's missionary, in his capacity as her executor.⁴⁷

On every enumerator's return from 1851 to 1911 – seven in all – Annie was never acknowledged as blind. The 1921 census does not record sensory or mental impairments, but by that year Annie's circumstances were modest, her dwelling being a single room in Blackford where she lived alone.⁴⁸ It is reasonable to speculate that she had sight loss, but perhaps had some peripheral vision. She certainly did not master 'normal' reading and writing, yet was able to work in a flax mill and to labour in the fields, albeit that her work may have relied on some tactile skills. She did, however, learn to read raised type. She was known to the Perthshire Society from its inception in 1866 and her tactile reading skills may be one of the early successes of the Society's missionary. Annie was 'blind', but was able-bodied rather than 'disabled'.

Annie Jamieson and Lucy Fletcher both had senile decay recorded as the cause of their deaths, but aside from this, Annie's life was in almost total contrast to that of Lucy. Annie was blind from birth while Lucy lost her sight as the consequence of an accident when she was in her thirties. Although Annie's life

⁴² Decennial census, 1851, Monzie, Logiealmond.

⁴³ Decennial census, 1861, 1871 and 1881, Monzie, Logiealmond.

⁴⁴ See (ed.) T. M. Devine, *Farm Servants and Labour in Lowland Scotland, 1770–1914* (Edinburgh, 1984).

⁴⁵ Perth Register, pp. 17, 29, 43, 57, 69, 81, 93, 105, 117; Registration of Death, Blackford, 19 May 1929.

⁴⁶ Registration of Death, Blackford, 29 December 1913, James Jamieson.

⁴⁷ Registration of Death, Blackford, 19 May 1929, Anne Jamieson.

⁴⁸ Decennial census, 1921, Blackford.

was spent in a relatively compact area of rural Perthshire, she was constantly on the move, while Lucy had her roots firmly placed in the urban environment of Perth and in comfortable accommodation for a significant period of her life. Annie was, it seems, a competent reader of raised type, but Lucy was slow to master this art. Although she was late in marrying, Annie was married for over two decades, but Lucy (like her sister and brother) did not wed. Lucy enjoyed family support throughout her days, while when Annie died it was the Perth Society that was her nearest 'kin'.

Thomas McGlashan

Like Annie Jamieson, Thomas McGlashan was known to the Perth Society from its inception in 1866 at which time he was twenty-six years of age. Thomas was born to Margaret McGlashan and her husband, Robert, on 2 March 1840 at his father's farm, Ballinluig of Dunfallandy in the parish of Logierait, located in the rural hinterland of the town of Pitlochry.⁴⁹ Thomas lost his sight at the age of ten as the result of 'inflammation'.⁵⁰ In contrast to the census reports for Lucy Fletcher, Thomas was recorded as blind in every enumerator's listing from 1851, irrespective of the extent of his sight loss, whether partial or complete.⁵¹

Thomas may have had diminished sight or may have been totally blind, yet he had an active life while remaining a member of a close family unit. Robert and Margaret McGlashan had nine children over two decades from 1826 to 1847. Thomas was the third son, but seventh in the family line, the sequence being Ann, Jane, Margaret, Jessie, Robert, John, Thomas, Alexander and Isabella.⁵² Of the four men, it was John and Thomas who broke away from the family farm in their early days, John becoming a gamekeeper and Thomas working as a carpenter. Carpentry was one of various crafts learned by blind boys at the likes of blind asylum workshops in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but there is no evidence that Thomas attended such an institution. It may well be that Thomas learned his woodworking skills in his native Perthshire.

The close bonds between family members were particularly seen in later life. The eldest sister, Ann, married James McNaughton of adjoining Moulin parish, in 1850.⁵³ Margaret may also have married, but the other three sisters, Jane, Jessie and Isabella did not marry, nor did any of the four brothers, Robert, John, Thomas and Alexander.⁵⁴ Ann's husband was a gamekeeper and this connection may have introduced John to gamekeeping while Robert and Alexander became the joint proprietors of what had been their father's farm at Ballinluig. The

⁴⁹ OPR, Logierait, Register of Births and Baptisms, p. 326.

⁵⁰ Perth Register, p. 40.

⁵¹ Decennial census, 1851, Logierait.

⁵² Decennial census, 1841, 1851, Logierait.

⁵³ OPR, Moulin, 1850, 144; OPR, Logierait, 1850, p. 40.

⁵⁴ See, for example, the entry for Easter Ballinluig, parish of Logierait, in the 1901 census, when the brothers ranged in age from fifty-seven to sixty-seven years; and the Registration of Death for Isabella, Pitlochry, 2 March 1925.

farm consisted of thirty-six acres and their dwelling had six rooms so they had accommodation and a livelihood of a reasonable standard for that part of the county of Perth.⁵⁵

Throughout his adult life, Thomas was attributed as being employed as a carpenter or joiner, and at one point was also recorded as undertaking coopering work, which perhaps suggests that he made barrels for one of the whisky distilleries operating in proximity to Pitlochry.⁵⁶ Age twenty-one, he was sharing a modest single-room dwelling with his brother, John, in Dunblane parish where John was a gamekeeper.⁵⁷ After their eldest sister, Ann, had married gamekeeper James McNaughton in 1850, she and her husband had settled at Dunblane where, by 1871, they had a six-room house for themselves and their family of seven, and with Thomas there as their guest.⁵⁸ However, by 1881, Thomas had returned to Ballinluig where he lived with Robert, Alexander, Jane, Jessie and Isabella, an arrangement that, with slight variations among the ageing siblings, endured for the next three decades.⁵⁹ Thomas died in 1910, aged seventy, from cerebral apoplexy.⁶⁰

Thomas had an active life despite becoming blind at the age of ten. There was no attempt to deny his blindness as sometimes occurred in childhood when parents might have felt a need for the passage of time before accepting and acknowledging a child's disability. Indeed, it might be argued that while Thomas was 'blind', like Annie Jamieson he was not 'disabled'. Thomas learned to read written text before his sight loss and he also learned to read raised type in the aftermath, certainly by the time that he was recorded by the Perth Society and whose missionary may have taught him. Indeed, Thomas was not only bilingual in having learned to read 'normal' and raised type, but was also bilingual in common with almost all of his Logierait neighbours who were consistently recorded as speakers of Gaelic as well as English in four censuses from 1881 to 1911. Thomas's family was unusual in that most of his siblings did not marry and they remained together into old age as a family unit of which Thomas was very much a part.

David Ferguson

Although living in the English monoglot town of Perth, David Ferguson was another bilingual Gaelic-speaker, but this was because he had grown up in the rural Argyllshire combined parish of Kilbrandon & Kilchattan. Old Parish

⁵⁵ Decennial census, 1881, Logierait, gives the acreage of the farm.

⁵⁶ For example, Decennial census, 1871, Dunblane, Cromlix Cottage; Perth Register, 1886–89, no. 21, p. 4; Decennial census, Easter Ballinluig, Logierait, 1901; Registration of Death, Logierait, 14 December 1910.

⁵⁷ Decennial census, 1861, Dunblane.

⁵⁸ OPR, Logierait, 1850, 80 and OPR, Moulin, 1850, 144; Decennial census, 1871, Dunblane, Cromlix Cottage.

⁵⁹ Decennial census, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911, Logierait.

⁶⁰ Registration of Death, Logierait, 14 December 1910.

Registers for Kilbrandon have not survived so the first record for him is the 1841 decennial census and that, of course, does not provide the detail progressively found in later census returns. In 1841, age ten, he was living with a family on the Ardmaddy Estate which leaves open the possibility that he had been ‘taken in’ as an orphan.⁶¹ Before losing his sight to cataract at the age of eighteen, according to entries for him in the Perth Register he had learned to read – the missionary had been aware of him from the creation of the Perth Society in 1866.⁶² Yet when he entered into marriage, registration entries indicate that he was unable to write, his ‘X’ mark endorsed by witnesses to his ‘signature’.⁶³ The extent of David’s education in his Argyllshire parish appears therefore to have been rudimentary.

David’s whereabouts are elusive in the years between his boyhood in Argyll and the acknowledgement of his presence in Perth in 1866 by the Perth Register. He does not, for example, appear in the register of the Blind Asylum in Edinburgh, but records of blind individuals under the patronage of such institutions in Scotland tend to be patchy.⁶⁴ However, he was certainly in Perth by 1866, and four years later at age thirty-nine, he married a local woman, Elizabeth Irvine, who had been blind from birth.⁶⁵ Their marriage lasted only six years, Elizabeth succumbing to pulmonary tuberculosis in 1877.⁶⁶ A year later, David entered into his second marriage, this time with Margery (aka Margaret) Mitchell from Perthshire’s Kinnoull parish; David was forty-eight while his second wife was twelve years his junior and also blind.⁶⁷ Throughout his life in Perth, David earned what was probably a modest income in one of the trades stereotypically associated with blind people, being variously described as a tea dealer, tea hawker, tea canvasser and tea vendor.⁶⁸

David died in 1905 in a two-room tenement dwelling at 246 High Street, Perth, where he had been experiencing the chronic bronchitis that brought on his demise. Earlier that year, the outdoor blind missionary noted that he was ‘getting frail’ and recorded his age as seventy-six which seems to be accurate.⁶⁹ His death registration is intriguing, having no family except for his wife, Margaret. She was blind and might have been distraught at her husband’s demise so that David’s death was reported by someone else. However, the registration was attended to by Jannet [*sic*] Brown of 16 Paul Street, whose relationship was noted on

⁶¹ Decennial census, 1841, Kilbrandon & Kilchattan, household of John Clark, Ardmaddy.

⁶² Perth Register, p. 2.

⁶³ Registration of Marriage, Perth, 1870 (Elizabeth Irvine) and 1878 (Margery Mitchell).

⁶⁴ The Register of the Royal Blind Asylum, Edinburgh was maintained from 1793 to 1963.

⁶⁵ Register of Marriages, Perth, 11 October 1870; Decennial census, 1871, Perth, East Church Parish.

⁶⁶ Registration of Death, Perth, 11 August 1877.

⁶⁷ Registration of Marriage, Perth, 16 July 1878; Decennial census, 1881, Perth, East Church Parish.

⁶⁸ Decennial census, 1871–1901, Perth; Registration of Marriage, Perth, 16 July 1878.

⁶⁹ Perth Register, p. 114.

the document, not as neighbour or acquaintance, but as ‘intimate friend’.⁷⁰ Perhaps, however, reading too much into this appellation should be avoided. The registration, signed in a shaky hand, relates to Janet Brown who with her husband, Peter Brown, her three daughters aged from sixteen to twenty-eight, and two grandchildren, resided next door to where David Ferguson had lived in former years.⁷¹

David Ferguson’s own blindness and that of both of his wives suggest that some members of Perth’s small community of outdoor blind were fraternally connected in solidarity. The Perth Society may well have encouraged this, perhaps to develop mechanisms of self-support or inter-reliance. David’s parents may have died when he was young, and neither he, his first wife Elizabeth, nor second wife Margaret, had a living parent at the time of their marriages. Although it seems that David had never mastered writing before his sight loss, the Perth Register claimed that he could read raised type. It may therefore have been that the modest size of the Perth and Perthshire outdoor blind community, despite the range and terrain of the county, was one which the missionary could closely manage (in contrast to his colleagues’ challenges in Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders) so that he could nurture reading through raised type, and encourage social and marital unions.

The two marriages of David Ferguson, a blind man, first to blind Elizabeth Irvine in 1870 and then to blind Margery Mitchell in 1878, were contrary to the views that were later to be expressed by Dr Thomas R. Armitage (1824–90), founder of the British and Foreign Blind Association in 1868, and also endorsed by the Royal Commission on the Blind in 1886, that blind people should not marry one another, fearing that such unions would result in the birth of children who were blind.⁷² Discouragement of relationships between blind people was a view that prevailed into the post-World War Two era as demonstrated by Fred Reid’s experience as a youth at the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh during the 1950s.⁷³ Nonetheless, such theories and opinions were not yet ingrained in 1870s rural Perthshire, especially in respect of the outdoor blind over whom the local missionary had variable influence, which was in contrast to the institutionalised regimes of blind asylums and their workshops. David Ferguson’s two blind intermarriages coincided with the very early years of the Perth Mission and perhaps at a time when the opinions of ‘experts’ on blind people and living with sight loss was less developed and prejudiced than became the case from the late 1870s and 1880s.

⁷⁰ Registration of Death, Perth, 7 October 1905.

⁷¹ Decennial census, 1901, Perth.

⁷² H. McFarlane, ‘Disabled Women and Socio-Spatial “Barriers” in Motherhood’ (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2004), 51–2.

⁷³ F. Reid, ‘The Panopticon: Towards an Intimate History of Special Schools for the Blind’, in (ed.) I. Hutchison, M. Atherton and J. Viridi, *Disability and the Victorians: Attitudes, Interventions, Legacies* (Manchester, 2020), 164–76.

Conclusions

The four cases selected for exploration were chosen on the basis of the subjects appearing almost completely throughout the twenty-two-year maintenance of the register for outdoor blind people living in Perth and Perthshire. Consequently, they were subject to some selection bias, which was furthered by an effort to gauge examples of female and male experience in both urban and rural contexts. They are not presented as depicting wider blind experience and, indeed, the earlier Edinburgh study suggests that there was no 'typical' life trajectory for blind people living outside institutionally controlled contexts.⁷⁴ Rather, these four attempts at biographies suggest that the scope of the Perth Register for further exploration of living with sight loss in the communities of a county in the southern Highlands of Scotland will, as shown with the Edinburgh Register, produce evidence of considerable diversity among Perthshire's blind population.

This particular survey of selected blind lives relies heavily upon entries in four source types: the Perth Register, Old Parish Registers until 1855, Civil Registrations of Births, Deaths and Marriages from 1855, and Decennial Census Returns from 1841 to 1921. These records have frequently been found to be fallible in their accuracy, being only as reliable as those supplying information in response to the enquiries of blind missionaries, clergy, registrars, and enumerators, and often dependent upon people's own uncertain knowledge of themselves and immediate family members. The sources employed therefore provide 'facts' of sometimes dubious reliability. In the absence of first-hand personal narratives, the need for speculation is a prerequisite in any attempt to reconstruct blind lives in Perth and Perthshire, and speculation can often be proven by later discoveries as flawed. However, the exploratory research on four outdoor blind lives makes an initial attempt to reconstruct blind experience in Perth and Perthshire, and shows that the diversity found among outdoor blind people in Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders during the Edwardian period, can be traced over a longer period, from the late Victorian era, in this south Highland setting. The Perth Register makes this possible and reaffirms that there was no such thing as a 'typical' experience of living as an outdoor blind person in Scotland from the 1880s to the 1900s.

⁷⁴ Hutchison, *Feeling Our History*, 98.