

CASE STUDY TWO



Danger on the River Nile

How old notebooks provided a link between the picture of a woman and an unknown death

By **Liz Carson**



As a teacher, then a therapist, Liz has always been interested in people and their stories. She is a prolific painter, writer, and now researcher.

Family heirlooms are a vital way to discover the intimate details of your ancestors. I luckily inherited my great-grandmother's notebooks, which shed light on her time in an unsettled Egypt after World War I.

Twenty-five years ago, an aunt gave me a photograph of my great-grandmother. I knew little about her, but I recognised the brown eyes and thick hair as my own, and I owned a scarab necklace I'd been told was hers. I knew she was Scottish and her name was Agnes, but neither my aunts, mother (born in Egypt but brought up in Scotland), nor uncle remembered her.

Some years before she died, my mother showed me four small notebooks left to her by my grandfather, which turned

out to be the diaries of my illusive and beautiful great-grandmother. As I read them a picture emerged of an adventurous woman with an astonishing supply of energy.

The books recorded in detail her travels in Europe as a young woman, her family life in Montrose and in 1919, a visit to one of her sons in Egypt. As I read them, I sensed her warm and intimate involvement in domestic life. She wrote of her six children, friends, servants and dressmakers; Christmas presents and house linen; her involvement with the church, thoughts about sermons and of a deep compassion for people who were sick or less fortunate than herself. Her energy seemed extraordinary and she was frequently called on to help out when friends or family were ill, distressed or vulnerable. She would go to them for as long as was necessary, leaving the family in the care of her husband and servants.

Egyptian adventure

Agnes appeared to have a great sense of fun, enjoying a full social calendar, often listing menus of when she ate out. She showed an enormous zest for life – aged 19 she climbed mountains and crossed glaciers in Switzerland with her husband John – so it was no surprise to me that aged 59 she offered to accompany her son and family to Egypt, in order to help her pregnant daughter-in-law.

It wasn't until a few years after inheriting the diaries that I wanted to find out more about the family. I discovered a family tree had been started in 1937 and using ScotlandsPeople (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk), Findmypast (www.findmypast.co.uk) and Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) as a starting point, I began adding information.

A mystery arose: though the date of Agnes' death had been

UPRISING

Causes

Egyptians believed that Britain's actions during WWI caused the uprising of 1919, purchasing cotton at below market prices then later paying the locals very low wages



Extraordinary The original picture of fearless Agnes Mitchell that started the family research

“Agnes wrote of the unsettling wailing of women and the chanting of anti-British slogans”

The middle classes

The emergence of a dramatic change in lifestyle

During the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of families who'd been living off the land as agricultural workers saw their opportunities in the fast growing industrial towns and in the railways, moving into new urban environments. Others had the opportunity for education, became engineers, lawyers and manufacturers. As the steel from the foundries, tarmac for roads, other raw materials and components were exported to countries within the Empire, some became ship-owners too, and rapidly enjoyed great wealth, privilege and influence. The agricultural workers often found themselves living in cramped conditions working for very long hours for extremely low wages.

For generations, British society had been polarised between the aristocracy and the working class; domestic servants, agricultural workers and the like, but suddenly this changed and a newly privileged group emerged within relatively few years. The pursuit of wealth became a priority and communities were changed forever.

added to the family tree by my grandfather, I couldn't find any official record of it. The Egyptian diary was written during the last few months of Agnes' life and posted back in installments to her husband in Scotland. It was a vivid portrayal of life for the newly-rich British occupiers who took their materials and expertise to Egypt. It also referred to Arab unrest in the streets, looting and riots

EGYPT

Rebellion

The Egyptian rebellion began with student protests and rapidly spread. Strikes and unrest, eventually forced Britain to grant independence to Egypt in 1922

quashed by the British Army. There were funerals in the streets and Agnes wrote of the “unsettling wailing of the Arab women and the chanting of anti-British slogans”.

Civil unrest

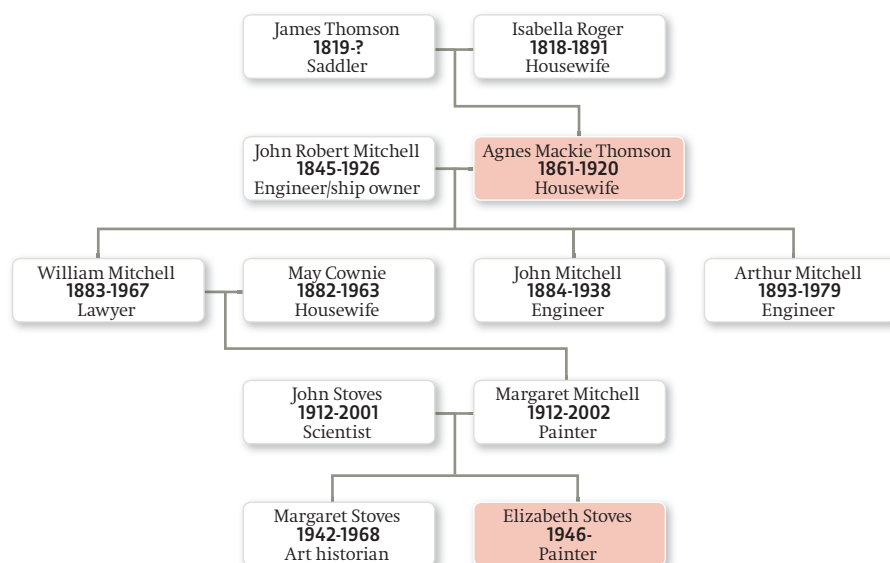
In October of 1919, Agnes wrote of her sons John and Arthur leaving for Cairo, where they were supervising a new road-building project. She later described “an awful rabble”

outside the house and looked out of the window to see a crowd of several hundred Egyptians breaking down the high wooden fence around the garden and carrying off the long pieces of wood, to assemble at the end of the road. Later she wrote: “We heard there was fighting and some killed, so we neither let the children out, nor went ourselves... Mr L also came in to tell us that our own military had been called out, and that order had been restored.”

One of the servants, Essa, had to go out for some provisions later that afternoon and came back looking “very sad and frightened” as the cars had all been stopped in the streets and the shops shut. She added, “John left a revolver with us, but I think we would hurt ourselves before anyone else.”

Agnes also wrote that she was very glad to get letters from Ernest and Agibel, two of her children who were in Scotland and I got the impression that she felt very far from home. Life in the household carried on much as usual however, and the next day, Agnes comments on bathing the baby and taking the two elder children, Joan and Lena, to the shops. She described ▶

THE STOVES/MITCHELL FAMILY TREE



Married Agnes and her husband John Robert Mitchell before she left for Egypt



the three crossing the road outside the Tribunal building where there was an “immense” crowd. She later went to buy food safely, but commented, “we can see from the papers that there has been a good deal of fighting.”

The next day, her sons returned having walked for miles carrying their bags from the station, as there were no cabs. They had been stopped by the military several times, and told that no one was allowed out after 9pm as the town was under Martial Law.

Agnes’ record of this tumultuous time in history is an astonishing mixture: taking her grandchildren to the park, evening trips for food, and the weekly box at the picture house for the latest Charlie Chaplin film; all under an undercurrent of unrest, a sense of dislocation of the ruling class from the local community and lack of understanding at their impact on the poor people. I constantly reminded myself of the context in which this



Above Agnes and her youngest son, Arthur
Above right Agnes, John and their grown-up children



thoughtful and compassionate woman was living.

Our family has a history of strong independent women and it seems Agnes Mackie was no exception. Against John’s wishes, she travelled by train amidst growing unrest, across the desert with her youngest son Arthur, so she could briefly see another son Ernest as he stopped off at Port Said on his way to Ceylon. Arthur had a work contract, so Agnes took the dangerous return journey to Alexandria on her own.

Unexplained death

Her final entry on 31 January 1920 finished with the words “Goodnight”; something she’d never written before – I wondered if she had a premonition that she was never going to get home again? Did she die in Egypt, on the return journey or did she get back to Scotland to see her husband and children again?

I have a copy of the sermon the minister in Montrose gave

“I wondered if she had a premonition that she was never going to get home again?”

Overseas deaths

How to find the records of British residents who passed on outside the country

Unless the body of the person you’re tracing has been brought back to the UK for burial, the usual sources of information – Scottish or English death registers – aren’t going to help you when tracing ancestors who died abroad. There’s a Register of Returns available, which lists deaths of non-military British citizens who died and are buried while temporarily away from the UK. If you have a Scottish enquiry, then the General Register Office for Scotland is the place to contact (www.gro-scotland.gov.uk).

shortly after her death, in which he refers to her as “no ordinary personality and this is no ordinary loss” and the circumstances of her death were “so unexpected and so sudden and so trying to all in her immediate circle.”

I’ve emailed the General Register Office for Scotland as British people who die abroad are registered on the Returns Register. I’m also waiting to hear from a student at Montrose library researching the local newspapers for 1920 and am hopeful my story will continue.

My research has been hugely aided by access to the diaries, but the interest they’ve generated is leading to a much wider and fascinating quest. I feel privileged to have had a glimpse into the personal life of this amazing woman. ■

RESOURCES

Heirlooms

Notebooks, letters and personal accounts are an invaluable source to discover your ancestors’ emotions and experiences, that you won’t find in official records

CONTACTS

Montrose Library

214 High Street, Montrose, DD10 8PH
e. Montrose.library@angus.gov.uk
t. 01674 673256

WEBSITES

Findmypast

w. www.findmypast.co.uk

Glasgow University Archive Services

w. www.gla.ac.uk/services/archives/contactus/generalenquiry

ScotlandsPeople

w. www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk